Isaac Asimov GREEN, GREEN, GREEN IS THE COLOR—

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

JULY

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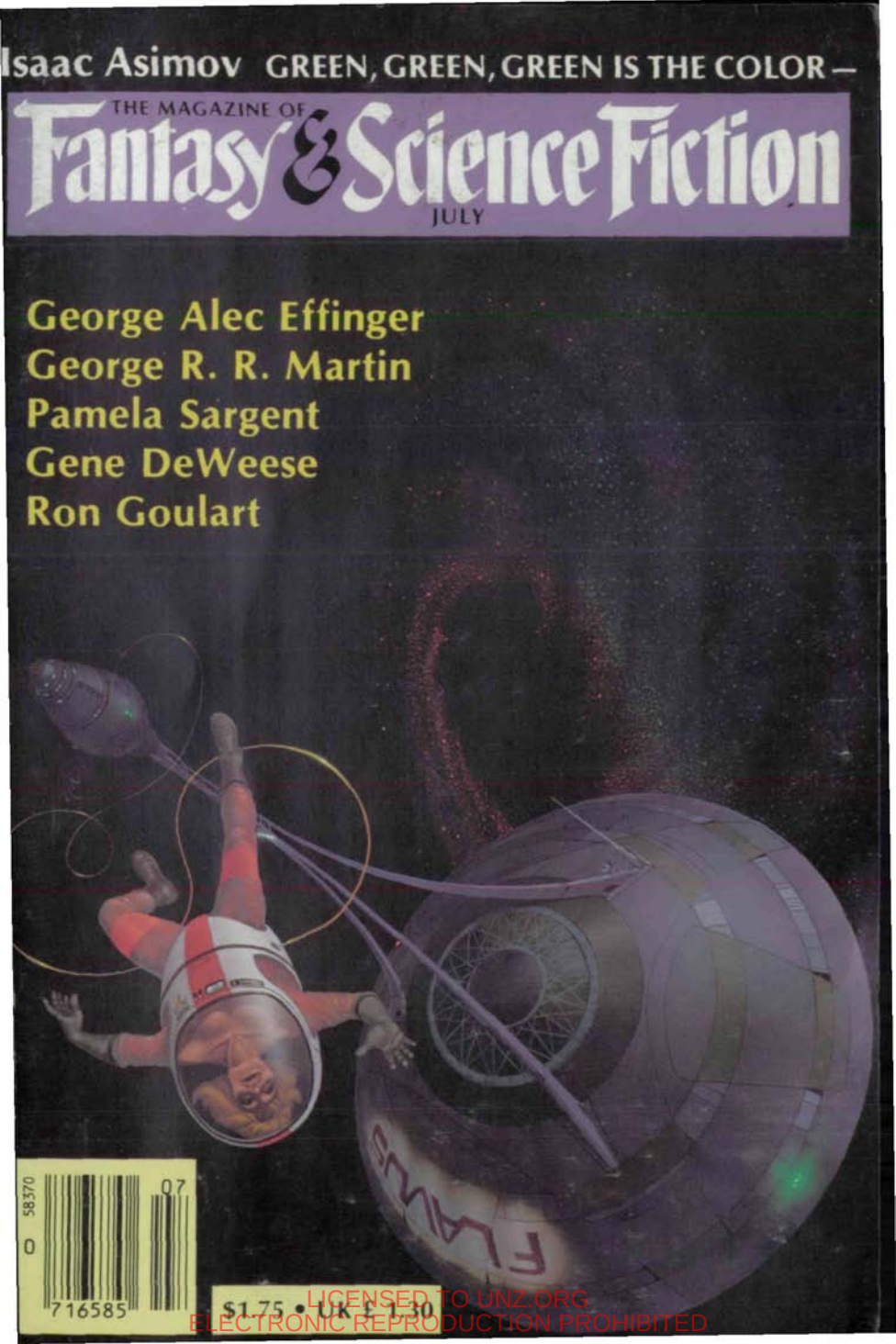

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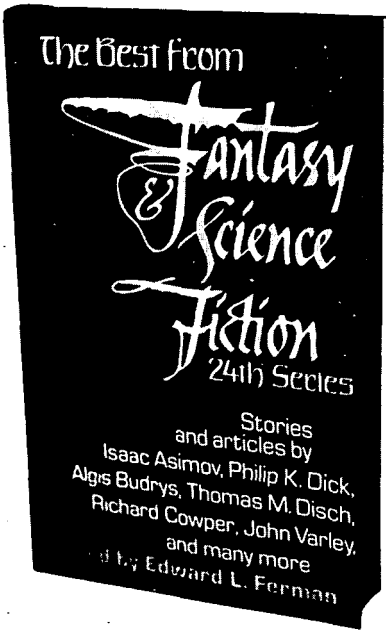
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One of the most intriguing ideas in SF is the notion of being stuck in a loop of time, endlessly repeating one day, or one hour. We recently published a couple of excellent examples: Damien Broderick's "Coming Back" (December 1982) and Gordon Eklund's "Revisions" (February 1983). Here, George Alec Effinger offers a clever variation on the theme.

The World of Pez Pavilion: Preliminary to the Groundbreaking Ceremony

BY GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

Day One

Just at noon on the seventeenth of February, 1996, Frank Mihalik became the first person to travel backward through time. He looked like an explorer and he behaved like a pioneer. He was tall and broad-shouldered and well-muscled, with a deep chest covered with the right amount of dark hair — virile but not atavistic — with large, strong hands but the gentle manner of a man who has made a gracious peace with the powerful body nature has given him. He had short, dark hair and bright, unyielding eyes. His face was rugged and handsome, but not pretty and definitely not cute. He spoke in a low, earnest voice and smiled often. He was intelligent but not tedious, a good friend in times of happiness or sorrow, a joy to his aging mother, a solid citizen and a good credit risk. He had been chosen to make the first trip into the past because Cheryl, his girlfriend, had roomed at college with a woman who was now a talent co-ordinator on a popular late-night television talk show. Such a woman had a lot of influence in the last years of the twentieth century.

The journey — or, at least, Mihalik's departure — was televised live all over the world. People in every nation on Earth saw Mihalik step from the silver van where he had eaten breakfast and gone through his final briefing. Accompanied by two of the project's supervisors, his girlfriend, Cheryl, and Ray, his backup man, Mihalik walked the last fifty yards to the embarcation stage. At the foot of the steps leading up to the stage itself, Mihalik shook hands with the supervisors and

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Ray. He hugged Cheryl and kissed her, familiarly but not passionately; this was a moment for emotional control and steadiness. Mihalik went up the steps and sat in the folding chair that had been placed at the target point. He waited while the voice of the project's control counted down the seconds. At T minus zero there was a flicker of amber light, a sizzle, a snap, and a moderate clap of thunder. Mihalik was gone. He had plummeted into the past.

He was now sitting in a darkened room. He knew immediately that it was no longer 1996. He wondered where he was — rather, *when* he was. He would still be in New York City, of course. He stood up, a crooked smile on his handsome face. He ran a hand through his mildly rumpled hair, made sure his fly was zipped, and felt his way across the room, toward a door that leaked a thin line of light at the bottom.

Outside, it was summer. In 1996 it had been February, cold and bleak; here it was warm and bright, the sky partly cloudy, the temperature in the mid eighties, the humidity somewhere around forty per cent. There was a large crowd of people outside, and they were wandering from one building to another; it seemed to Mihalik that he was in some kind of exhibition. The people carried maps, and the parents among them struggled to control their small children, all of whom wanted to run off in directions other than straight ahead. Mihalik walked close to a young couple with a baby in a stroller. He looked at the book the man was carrying: *Official Guide Book — New York's World Fair 1939, For Peace and Freedom.*

The building Mihalik came out of was the Hall of Industry and Metals. He walked along the avenue, marveling at the past and the peace and quiet and brotherhood and Christian fellowship everyone showed toward his neighbors. There were no fights on the sidewalk. There were no vagrants, no troublemakers, no drug dealers or prostitutes. There were only happy families and corporate exhibits. This was the golden past, an era of innocent bliss, of concern for the rights of individuals and respect for private property. Mihalik was grateful for the opportunity to escape the mad world of 1996, to spend a little time in this more humane place. He would return to the present refreshed, and he would be able to help his own world identify the essential problems that created jealousy and mistrust among people. Mihalik was not unaware of the weight of responsibility he carried; he had been charged with the duty of returning to 1996 with some token of what society had lost in the intervening sixty years.

Mihalik walked toward a great white needle and a great white globe. He had seen pictures of these structures: the Trylon and Perisphere. They were located at the Fair's Theme Center, and Mihalik had a feeling they represented something important. His first

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task, as he began to orient himself in the world of 1939, was to find out just what these two imposing symbols meant to the people of his grandparents' generation. He stopped a young woman and spoke to her; she looked at his unusual costume — he was wearing the thin, olive green one-piece garment of 1996 — and assumed he was one of the Fair's employees. "What do these marvelous buildings mean to you?" he asked.

"The Trylon?" she said. "The Trylon is a symbol of man's upward yearnings, pointing into the sky where dwell all hope and ambitions."

"That's just what I was thinking," said Mihalik.

"And the Perisphere, well, the Perisphere is the promise of Democracity, you know."

"Democracity?" asked Mihalik.

"You walk into that big bowl and spread out before you is a model of the city of the future. Have you ever seen a city of the future?"

"Yes," said Mihalik, "on numerous occasions."

"Most cities of the future are too conservative, I feel," said the young woman. "We need monorails. We need aerial bridges linking cloud-piercing office buildings and apartment towers. We need parks where slums now blight the boroughs. We need fourteen-lane highways that parallel new, sparkling waterways. We need shopping and recreation centers where citizens may spend their newly-won leisure and newly-earned wealth. We need bright, airy schools where young minds may learn to value the gift of life that has been given them. All of this lies within the Perisphere, a dream of times to come, a vision of the New York City that will exist in our childrens' lifetime in this place. The Perisphere is a ringing challenge, a concretion of our hope and ambitions, as symbolized by the Trylon, drawn down to earth and made manifest for our inspection. It is a kind of miracle."

"I can't wait to see it," said Mihalik.

"Yeah, but there's this huge line all the time," she said. "You got to be ready to wait. I hate lines, don't you? You'd be better off seeing something else."

"What would you suggest?"

The young woman thought for a moment. "Have you seen the Monkey Mountain in Frank Buck's Jungleland?"

"No," said Mihalik, "I just got here."

"I love to watch monkeys," said the young woman. "Well, enjoy yourself." She waved goodbye.

"Thank you," he said. He decided to see Democracity another time. He wanted to look at the other buildings, the exhibitions, and the beautiful, quaint Art Deco architecture of this harmless island in the past. The buildings themselves reminded him of something: their graceful curved lines where, in 1996, they would instead have had sharp, forbidding edges; their

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naive pride in proclaiming which company or nation had erected them; their clean accents in glass brick and stainless steel. After a moment he knew what they made him think of — it was the colors, the pastel pinks and greens. They were the same colors as the little candy hearts he used to see on Valentine's Day, the ones with the clever little slogans. Oh Baby and Kiss Me and You Doll and 2 Much. The candy colors contributed to the feeling of childlike innocence Mihalik felt. It made no difference that the buildings celebrated the very things that turned this wonderful world into the anxiety-ridden, bankrupt ruin of 1996.

He walked toward the Lagoon of Naions. It was heartwarming to see families enjoying their outing together. That sort of thing was rare in Mihalik's time. Here in 1939 mothers and fathers still protected their children from the evils of the world, instead of just throwing up their hands in futile despair. Here there were parents who wanted the best for the young ones, who still thought it was valuable to show the children new things, educational things, sights and sounds and experiences that let the boys and girls grow up feeling that they participated in an exciting, vibrant world. Mihalik wished that his parents had been more like that. He wondered, then, where his parents were; in 1939, he realized, his mother had not even been born. His father was a boy of two, running around in a darling little sailor suit somewhere in Elkhart, Indiana. Mihalik was sorry that he only had a few hours to spend in the past; he would have been curious to visit his grandparents. That was only one of the interesting things he could do in 1939.

Adventures in Yesterdayland

Mihalik looked at his watch; it was eleven o'clock. He sat on a bench along Constitution Mall, under the cold stone eyes of the giant statue of George Washington. There was a newspaper on the bench. Mihalik paged through the paper happily, laughing aloud at the simple views people had of the world in this day. He expected to be astounded by the prices in the advertisements, and he was: linen suits went for $8.25 or two for $16, a beef roast was seventeen cents a pound. They didn't have linen suits or beef roasts in 1996. But Mihalik had been prepared for this. He had been briefed, he had been carefully indoctrinated by technicians and specialists so that whatever era he ended up in, he wouldn't be stunned into inactivity by such things as the price of a beef roast. So Mihalik was not paralyzed by temporal shock. He found that he could still turn the pages of the newspaper. On the sports page he read that both the Dodgers and the Giants had lost, but that the Yankees had crushed the Browns 14-1 on Bill Dickey's three home runs. He didn't have any idea

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what any of that meant.

"Hello," said a man in a tan suit. He looked as if he never got any sun; Mihalik thought the man's face was the unhealthy color of white chocolate Easter bunnies. The man took a seat on the bench.

"Hello," said Mihalik.

"I'm from out of town. I'm from South Bend, Indiana." Mihalik recalled that Indiana had been one of the fifty-two "states" that had once composed the United States. "You're probably wondering why I'm not over at the Court of Sport," said the resident of 1939.

"Yes," said Mihalik, "that's just what I was thinking."

"Because they're raising the blue and gold standard of the University of Notre Dame over there, right this minute. But I said to myself, 'Roman,' I said, 'why travel all this way by train and come to this wonderful Fair, just to see them raise a flag and give some speeches?' "

"I know exactly what you mean. I came a long way, too, and I'm trying to decide what to see first."

"I'm looking forward to seeing the girls in the Aquacade."

Mihalik looked at his watch. He didn't know how long he would have in the past, and he thought he could spend the time more profitably examining all the fascinating little things that contributed to the peace and plenty and harmony he saw all about him. "Someone recommended the monkeys in Frank Buck's Jungleland," he said.

the man from Indiana seemed angry. "I didn't come all this way to see monkeys," he said. He stood up and walked away.

"No," thought Mihalik, "you came all this way to see shameless women." He glanced through the newspaper a little further. In the comics, Dixie Dugan was wondering about a handsome stranger who was coming into the Wishing Well Tea Shoppe every day. An article informed him that in Berlin the Germans were having practice air raid drills because, as a German spokesman said, the fact is that air attack in modern times is not beyond the range of possibility. Mihalik recalled that the Second World War was due to start any time now, so the Germans were laughing up their sleeves at the rest of the world. And the United States had revoked its trade agreement with Japan because of Japan's conduct in China, and in a few months there would be an embargo on raw materials.

Yet all around him, Mihalik saw happy people enjoying the summer morning, crushing the carnations along Constitution Mall, dropping paper cups on the sidewalks, littering George Washington's feet with mustard-covered paper napkins. Could they not see how international events were building toward the great cataclysm that would lead inexorably to the terrifying world of 1996? Would he have to grab them all, one by one, and

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scream into their faces, "Behold, how the world rushes headlong to its doom?" Would they listen? No, admitted Mihalik, not with the Yankees so comfortably in first place. To these people, everything was right with the world. Everything seemed normal. They had no idea that they were the architects of the future, each of them individually, and that their attendance here at the World's Fair was part of the reason their descendants fifty-seven years hence were suffering. "Enjoy it while you can," murmured Mihalik bitterly.

Farther up Constitution Mall were four statues, four white figures in the overstated, heroic manner that Mihalik always associated with totalitarian governments. "I must be wrong," he thought. "These statues were put here to celebrate the best aspects of the American Way, as it was understood decades before my birth, during one of the great ages of the ascendancy of the United States." The statues represented the Four Freedoms. There was a half-naked woman looking up, depicting Freedom of Religion. There was a half-naked woman gesturing vaguely, illustrating Freedom of Assembly. A third half-naked woman with a pencil and notepad took care of Freedom of the Press. And a partially-draped man with his hand upraised somehow conveyed the notion of Freedom of Speech. The statues were white; everything along Constitution Mall was white, the Trylon and Perisphere, the flowers, the statues, all the way to the Lagoon of Nations. Things in other areas were color-coded; each building in a particular section of the Fair was the same color, but the farther away from the Theme Center it was, the deeper the shade. It was not long before Mihalik learned to find his way around the complex of streets and walkways.

About noon, he realized that he was very hungry. "They ought to have sent some provisions with me," he thought. For the first time, he felt that the scientists who planned his journey into the past had overlooked some important details. They had failed to foresee all the difficulties he might encounter. For instance, he had no money. There were hamburgers and popcorn and cotton candy and Cokes all around him, but Mihalik was helpless to get anything to eat. He watched sadly as little children dropped large globs of ice cream on the sidewalk. "What a waste," he said to himself. "That could feed a family of six Dutch refugees in 1996." It also could have fed him. He sat on another bench and tried to devise a way of getting something to eat. He didn't know whether he would have to spend an hour in the past or a day or a week. He had had a good breakfast in the silver van, but now it was lunchtime.

"Tired?" said a man who sat next to him on the bench. Mihalik made a mental note to report on the friendliness of the people in the past. They all

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seemed eager to share his views and listen to his opinions. That was very rare in 1996.

"Yes," said Mihalik. "I've been walking all morning, and I've just discovered that I have no money."

"You've been robbed? A pickpocket?" The man seemed outraged.

"I guess so," said Mihalik.

The man looked at Mihalik's green jumpsuit. "Where did you keep your wallet?" he asked.

"My wallet?"

"You don't have any pockets."

"Well," said Mihalik lamely, "I carried my money in my hand."

"Uh huh," said the man dubiously. "Do you still have the stub from your ticket?"

"Yeah," said Mihalik, "it's right here. Oh, my God! The thief must have stolen that, too!"

"Sure, pal. I'm a detective, and I thing I ought to take you—"

Mihalik got up and ran. He didn't look back; he was big and strong and fast, and he knew that he could outdistance the detective. Mihalik ran to the right, into the Heinz Dome. He looked around briefly, but what interested him the most were the samples of all the Heinz products they were giving away free. He went back to each again and again, until the employees of the Dome began whispering among themselves. Mihalik took that as a cue to leave, and he walked out of the building. Several spoonsful of relish and catsup had done little for his hunger, but he did have a nice plastic souvenir, a pin in the shape of a pickle. On top of the Dome was a statue of the Goddess of Perfection. Mihalik was not aware that there *was* a goddess of perfection, in anyone's pantheon; it was just something else that had been forgotten on the way to the end of the century.

He checked his watch again, and he found that it had stopped at 1:07. The sky was becoming darker; the newspaper had mentioned a great drought the city had suffered for more than a month. It looked as if this afternoon there would be some relief. "Just my kind of luck," he thought. But there would be plenty of interesting things he could see while he waited for the rain to pass.

The first heavy drops fell just as he left the Washington State Exhibit. The rain fell with flat spatting sounds on the concrete paths. Mihalik looked around quickly, then ducked into the Belgian Pavilion. He saw more films and exhibits of things that would soon become extinct. He wondered how horrified these people would be if they knew how tenuous their existence was, how little time was left for their world, for the things they so took for granted. A Belgian girl was working away in poor light, making lace. What place was there in 1996 for lace, or for Belgian girls either, for that matter? Both had virtually ceased to exist. Yet Mihalik dared not pass that information on to these people: they very definitely were not world leaders, nor even stars

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of stage and screen who would have some influence over world opinion.

In one part of the Belgian Pavilion there were diamonds from the Congo, which at this time was still a Belgian colony. There was a copy of a statue of King Albert made of diamonds. It looked foolish to Mihalik, but the diamonds made him think of rock candy, the kind he used to eat when he was young, with the little piece of string inside that always stuck between his teeth. There were many diamonds and other precious gems; Mihalik wished that he had just one with which to buy a hot dog.

The day passed quickly. Mihalik wondered what he ought to do. He knew that it was very expensive to keep him in the past; he was surprised that he hadn't been brought back already. He didn't think he could learn much more at the Fair: the really interesting exhibits charged admission, and he didn't have a single penny. And he might as well not even bother going over to the amusement section. It didn't make any difference where he was when the technicians recalled him; he didn't have to be in the same place from which he started. But he hadn't completely answered the questions the great thinkers of the future wanted solved. "I've been here since nine o'clock. Maybe they're going to go for a full twelve hours." Mihalik shrugged; in that case, the best thing to do was stay at the Fair. At ten o'clock there was going to be an invasion from Mars and he kind of wanted to see it.

At quarter of ten he started walking toward Fountain Lake, where the 212th Coast Artillery had set up. Mars was as close to Earth as it had been in fifteen years, closer than it would be for another seventeen. The management of the Fair had taken the opportunity to show what would happen if Martians took it into their pointy little green heads to attack the 1939 New York World's Fair. Airplanes flew by overhead. There was a complete blackout around Fountain Lake, and instead of the usual nightly spectacular, there were flares and fireworks and anti-aircraft bursts and machine gun fire, all for Peace and Freedom, and then the fountains themselves began dancing and throwing their red, green, blue, and yellow streams at the invisible, cowardly invaders. In a few minutes it was all over, and the public began walking slowly toward the Fair's exits. It was time to go home, time to digest the marvelous holiday, time to tuck in Junior and Sis and thank God and Mayor LaGuardia for the swell day at the Fair and the victory over the Martians. It was time for Mom and Dad to count their blessings and hug each other and realize just how lucky they were to be living in the World of Tomorrow. It was time for Frank Mihalik to figure out what he was going to do next. He obviously wasn't flashing back yet to 1996, and he wasn't welcome any longer on the fairgrounds, not until nine o'clock the next morning. This was

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something he hadn't considered: he had no money and nowhere to go.

He walked with the crowd through the exit and into the subway. Even though he didn't have the fare, he was able to slip on a train in the middle of the throng. He stood in the crowded subway car, trying to keep his balance and at the same time avoiding shameless body contact. He wondered if there could be any rides in the amusement section of the Fair that were as frightening and revolting as the subway; he doubted it, because anything so terrible would have made its mark on civilization, and would have been known to the historians of 1996. "We're jammed in here like a boxful of Milk Duds all crushed together," he thought. He rode for a long time, through the borough of Queens and into Manhattan. He was tempted to get off and walk around the famous places that had once existed in New York: Broadway, Times Square, Fifth Avenue. But he didn't think he would be so lucky later, trying to get back on the subway without money. He decided to spend the whole night on the train.

There were fewer and fewer people on the train as time passed. He looked at his watch: it was almost midnight. The train was pulling into a large, noisy underground station. He waited for the doors to open. There was a flicker of amber light, a sizzle, a snap, and a moderate clap of thunder. Then everything went dark. "Thank God!" said Mihalik aloud. He knew he was back home. Very soon he would see Cheryl, his girlfriend, and Ray, his backup. Ray would be sorry he missed the Fair. At least Mihalik had brought back a pickle pin for Cheryl. He got up and tried to feel his way in the dark. He wondered where he had materialized. He found a door after a few moments and walked through.

A Necessary and Fundamental Change in Game-Plan

Outside, it was bright daylight. "That isn't right," thought Mihalik. The time in 1996 was two hours ahead of 1939; he had left at noon and arrived at ten in the morning. He had last looked at his wristwatch just before midnight; it ought to be two A.M. "I'll bet I know what it is," thought Mihalik, a wide smile appearing on his face, "I'll bet there's this time dilation principle. Maybe twelve hours in 1996 translate to more or less than that in 1939. So I really wasn't kept in the past as long as I thought. I just got the benefit of the Mihalik Effect." He liked the sound of that a lot.

He was less happy when he left the building. It turned out to be the Hall of Industry and Metals. "My God," he thought, "they brought the whole building back with me." All around him he saw laughing, happy people enjoying what was clearly the 1939 New York World's Fair. Mihalik was sturdy

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and he was almost fearless, but he had a tough time handling disappointment. Sometimes he chose the most incredible theories rather than face up to the truth. "They brought the whole damn Fair back!" he cried. "Well, at least they'll be able to study this period at their leisure." Privately, Mihalik thought it was an extravagant waste of time, energy, and research bucks.

In lighthearted moments, Mihalik had tried to imagine his welcome back in the gritty, weary world of 1996. He had pictured plenty of blue and yellow bunting hanging from buildings, political figures on hand to share his glory, beautiful San Diego screen stars with orphans for him to kiss, bands, cheering, free beer. He saw none of that. It was all very disillusioning to him. There *was* a band, he had to admit that, but it was the Saskatoon, Saskatchewan Girls' Pipe Band, and they had played at the Fair yesterday and had somehow been snatched into the future along with the rest of the World of Tomorrow.

He saw a young couple wheeling a stroller. They looked familiar; it took a moment, but Mihalik recalled them. They had been the couple whose copy of the guidebook yesterday let him know where he had arrived. And, evidently, they had returned to the Fair for a second day, only to be whisked through time along with the Saskatoon Girls' Pipe Band. He felt he owed them some sort of apology.

He found a bench and sat down to wait. Someone would come to get him soon, he knew. He needed to be debriefed. He needed to be debriefed and fed. He hoped the scientists and technicians had a hearty meal waiting for him, and a warm bath, and a nice bed, because he didn't feel that he could face world leaders and San Diego screen stars in his present condition. He would be ashamed to spend another hour in the same green jumpsuit.

There was a newspaper on the bench. Mihalik picked it up and read it for a moment before he realized that it was from the day before. That made him wrinkle his brow; he was sure, from all that he had seen, that the Fair's sanitation employees wouldn't have left the newspaper on the bench all day and all night. But there were the same stories: the air raid drills in Berlin, the revocation of the Japanese trade pact, Dixie Dugan and her handsome stranger, Bill Dickey and his three home runs. He took the paper with him, intending to throw it in a trash container. He had always been civic-minded.

"Hello," said a man.

"Hello," said Mihalik.

"I'm from out of town. I'm from South Bend, Indiana. You're probably wondering why I'm not over in the Court of Sport."

Mihalik studied this joker. He was wearing a suit the color of Bit-O-Honey. Why had all these people come back for another day, and why were they all wasting their time going back

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to the same places he had seen them at yesterday? Didn't they realize it was 1996 beyond the Fair's gates now, no longer their comfortable, secure 1939? Well, he didn't want to be the one to tell them. Let them find out on their own. There was no real way to prepare them for it, anyway. "I'll bet I know," said Mihalik. "I'll bet you said to yourself, 'Roman, why travel all this way by train and come to this wonderful Fair, just to see them raise a flag and give some speeches?' "

The man stared at Mihalik. "How did you know I was going to say that? How did you know my name was Roman?"

"Did I guess right?" asked Mihalik.

"Right as rain. Both times."

"I'm an amusement attraction. You owe me twenty-five cents."

"Gee," said Roman, still astonished, digging out a quarter from a little change purse, "they don't have anybody like you in South Bend."

Mihalik nodded wisely. "You got to come to New York for that," he said. "This is the big city. You be careful now, you hear?"

"Gee," said the man again. He walked away, shaking his head.

"You came to see the girls in the Aquacade, right?" Mihalik called after him. The man's mouth dropped open. "Don't worry, that one's on the house. Have a good time!" Mihalik wished that the designer of the official time-travel project's suit had foreseen a need for pockets. It meant that he had to carry the quarter in his hand until he decided how to spend it. He walked around the Fair, noticing many other people he had seen the day before. He found that increasingly odd.

As he was sitting on another bench, a man came up to him. "Tired?" the man asked.

"Yes," said Mihalik. "It's tough, guessing people's occupations, you know. I bet I can guess yours, easy. For a dollar."

"Concessions like that are all over in Carnivaland," said the man. "And don't none of them cost a dollar."

"You're scared to try," said Mihalik.

"You're a liar," said the man. "All right, go ahead. What am I?"

"You're a detective."

"Naw."

"Yeah, you're a detective. You've got a badge in a black wallet in the inside pocket of your jacket."

"Do I look like a detective to you?" said the man grimly.

"You want me to fish the goddamn badge out for you?" asked Mihalik.

"Sure, pal, you just try. Say, I ought to—"

"Never mind, keep your dollar. I must have been out of my mind."

The man studied Mihalik closely. "How'd you know I was a dick?"

"Your intelligent face," said Mihalik.

"Look, pal, I think I'm going to take you—"

Mihalik got up and ran. He thought

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while he ran, something he had learned to do while still in his teens. He realized that he was faced with two mutually exclusive explanations for the day's events. The first was that the whole Fair had been picked up bodily from Flushing Meadows in 1939 and transported to 1996, and the people who had done the moving were taking their time about announcing themselves. The second was that, in some weird and super-science way, he was living Thursday, July 27, 1939 all over again. He had reached no conclusions when he came to the Heinz Dome; neither of the choices was particularly attractive.

The matter was decided not long after. While he wandered into a part of the Fair he had not seen the day before, he casually looked at his watch. It had stopped at 1:07, the same time it had before. "Hmm," said Mihalik. He knew significance when he encountered it. Evidence was piling up in favor of the second explanation.

He passed by some more things he had either seen already or wasn't interested in. It seemed that he might be forced to spend longer in 1939 than anyone had anticipated. "Maybe this is all a dream," he told himself. "Maybe yesterday was all a dream, and this is it coming true. Maybe yesterday was real and I'm dreaming about it now." For a few minutes those thoughts were more entertaining than the film he was watching in the Science and Education Building. It was called *Trees and Men.*

He saw more people he recognized, and turned his early twenty-five cent victory into a tidy four-and-a-half dollars, which he spent on a Maryland softshell crab at one place and some strawberries in Moselle wine at the Luxembourg Exhibit in the Hall of Nations. Individually, the items were spectacular. Together, they were lousy; but Mihalik had little experience in dining so extravagantly. Real strawberries surprised him. They tasted nothing like the Lifesavers and Turkish Taffy that presented themselves as strawberry flavored.

The rain started right on time. Mihalik smiled and went into the Petroleum Industries Building and watched another terrible film, *Pete Roleum and His Cousins,* a puppet animation. In 1996 there was a worldwide ban that prohibited puppet animations; now Mihalik understood why.

It rained on the twilight concert of the Manhattan Music School Chorus and on the Rev. Carleton F. Hubbard of the Ocean Parkway Methodist Church, who gave an address few people listened to. Mihalik was getting very tired. He had been robbed of his entire night and had not slept now in — how long? He'd lost track. He wondered where he could spend his second night in the romantic past. He looked around the Fair, at the people who were still having a terrific time. "Personally," he thought, "I've had just about enough." Finally he decided to do just what he had done the night before. He watched the obsolete airplanes fly to

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victory over the no-show Martians; interplanetary combat decided by default. Mihalik shook his head ruefully — if only the real thing had been so easy in 1992.

He got on the subway and was again disgusted by the crowded conditions. It was only natural that he'd feel the same; these were the same people. He was getting weary of the beauties and quaintness of this bygone age. He was sick to death of Thursday, July 27.

Just at midnight there was a flicker of amber light, a sizzle, a snap, and a moderate clap of thunder. Then everything went dark.

A Sign from the Future or God or Something

Mihalik sat on the chair in the lightless room. "I've been here before," he thought. He was exhausted, hungry, and thirsty, yet his curiosity urged him to ignore all that and run to the door. There were two possibilities: either he had returned to the future, to his home in 1996; or he had cycled around once again, locked into Thursday as if on an endless tape loop of the hours between ten A.M. and midnight. Neither logic nor the way these things work out in stories permitted anything else. Suddenly despairing, Mihalik was in no hurry to learn the truth. He stretched himself out on the floor and slept until his spent energies had restored themselves. Only then did he rise and feel his way to the exit. He grasped the doorknob, took a deep breath, and went through.

He was still at the Fair. Mihalik accepted his fate quietly: he was stranded in the past, marooned upon the reefs of time, lost possibly forever on this same long-dead day. He maintained some hope, because he had faith in the science of tomorrow and the dedication of everyone involved in the time-travel project. He realized that his fate included an unusual inconvenience: he would have to adjust to a fourteen hour day.

He made the unused room in the Hall of Industries and Metals his home, his fortress. "I must begin to provide for myself," he thought. It was seven o'clock in the evening. He wandered through the Fair in the slackening rain, and he saw that fortunately everything he required for a good life was available here. There were food and shelter, clothing and companionship, candy and balloons. He looked at his watch, which had again stopped at 1:07, during his nap. It was a symbol to him of his isolation. It also suggested that if he relied on his intelligence and wits, he would suffer little in a material way. He could do nothing, however, about the essential loneliness of the shipwrecked traveler. The world he came from could not be reached on a handmade raft of logs.

The days passed, all of them basically identical. Mihalik amused himself

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by learning the movements of the people and things he saw during the day. After a while he began to win money by betting with the visitors. "See that woman in the white hat?" he would ask. He pointed to a woman with a hat decorated with many white balls, like a chocolate nonpareil covered with round white sprinkles.

"What of it?"

"I'll bet you a buck that she stops by the bench, bends down, and takes off her shoe."

"You're crazy."

And soon Mihalik had the price of a dinner of hot dogs and a soft drink. It didn't take long before he knew who would accept a bet and how much he could raise the stake. He even began calling the people by their names, like old friends, startling them or fooling them into believing he had strange mental powers. It made no difference; after midnight, when it all began again, they always forgot what happened on the previous version of the day.

But, in a similar and more ominous fashion, Mihalik lost everything he gained during the day. He tried to build up a supply of food, but it disappeared at midnight. A pillow and a blanket that he moved into his secret home vanished during the night as well. Every mark he made upon this world of the past evaporated with the rising of the sun. Mihalik was forced to go out each day and begin all over again. He could not save against hard times. He could not afford to be sick, or to take a holiday. His life became a daily struggle to hunt or gather food.

The man from 1996 avoided thinking about the ramifications of that fact. He had been given, in effect, a license to perform the most hideous crimes — whatever catastrophes and personal tragedies he created would all be made better at midnight. Whatever the police did to him, wherever they took him, at midnight he would be back in the dark room in the Hall of Industries and Metals. On a few occasions, in unsettled moments, he allowed himself to behave without conscience, knowing that no genuine damage could be done. He robbed, he assaulted, and once he beat a man severely beneath the granite gaze of Freedom of Assembly. He was frightened by the fear and frustration that were unleashed; he didn't know such horrible things were pent up inside him, and he vowed to stand guard against being taken over by them.

"A man in my situation will descend into madness," he thought. "It is the natural and expected course to follow." Mihalik decided to forego the years of slow deterioration and fall apart in one quick plunge. That was the way things were done where he came from.

He began a journal, although he knew it was a pointless thing to do. "This Fair has become a Carnival of Despair," he wrote. He rather liked that line; he thought it showed a cer-

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tain style. "I am alone here, among a crowd of 101,220 (71,491 paid; Fair Total To Date: 15,562,809). Everyone I knew is dead to me, or might as well be — Cheryl, my beloved; Ray, the greatest old backup a man could want; all the guys in the long white lab coats; every friend and relative and enemy and total stranger I ever saw. In these last few days I have railed against the fate that brought me here. That was a fruitless exercise. I have cursed the gods for singling me out for this punishment. That, too, brought me no nearer a solution. I perceived at first that I had no chance of relief, I had neither food, house, clothes, nor weapon on which to rely. There was nothing but death before me. Is this the way it would end for Frank Mihalik, Chronologic Trailblazer? Devoured in the past? Murdered by savages, starved to death in the midst of plenty? As night approached I again fought off these phantoms and determined to sleep soundly, and to take appropriate measures in the morning.

"This I attempted to do. In the light of the new day I saw, to my great surprise, that upon the shores of time's great ocean, upon which I had been cast up by the inscrutable Governor of the universe, there were also such things as I needed for my livelihood, if not my complete happiness. I tried to build a little store of things, a gathering of provisions won by cleverness, stealth, and yes, occasional violence. But these provisions disappeared at midnight, like the magical accoutrements of Cinderella, and I was left each morning with only those things I had brought with me through the corridors of time — myself, my clothing, and my wristwatch." Mihalik abandoned his attempt to record his trials when he realized that the journal, as well, would disappear at midnight, and that he could never keep track of anything from one day to the next. A calendar was impossible; even scratches made on the wall or slashes carved into a wooden pole would vanish with the day. It was just as well, he told himself; the journal had started to go off the deep end before it was a page old.

Mihalik was troubled by the notion that his imprisonment was, in fact, a form of punishment, something that had been planned and kept a secret from him but set up specifically to torment Frank Mihalik. He didn't understand why; he had alway been a model citizen. His only flaw, or, at least, all that he could recall anyway, was that he coveted his neighbor's ass. But there was a lot of that in 1996; he thought it was unfair that he had been singled out for such monstrous treatment. He wanted everyone to know he was heartily sorry. But that didn't seem to be enough.

One day, Mihalik rose from his sleep sometime after noon — his watch had stopped, as it did every day, at 1:07 — and went forth to have fun and find entertainment among the people. The newspaper was where it always

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was, on the bench. Mihalik read it once again, paying attention this time to articles he had only glanced at before. He thought he might go into Manhattan one evening to see a movie; the scientists in 1996 would want to know about popular entertainments. He considered seeing *Naughty But Nice*, with Ann Sheridan, the Oomph Girl. There was a serious lack of Oomph in Mihalik's world of the future. He would be doing everyone a great service by returning with his impressions of the real thing.

But there were a lot of exciting shows to chose from. There were funny little items in the news, too, and he wished that he could talk about them with Cheryl. He missed her and her simple, guileless approach to life.

One article caught Mihalik's eye. He had read it before, but had paid little attention to it — it had been just an amusing example of how foolish these people could be when they took themselves too seriously. The story described how some scientists at a major university had unlocked the secret of atomic structure. "Within the heart of the atom," claimed Dr. Z. Marquand, "is a solid little nucleus, shaped like a football. Tiny things called electrons whip around the nucleus, and that's about all there is to it."

"This will make an entertaining diversion," thought Mihalik. He went to a public telephone, dropped in a nickel, and had the operator connect him with Dr. Marquand's office at the university.

"Hello, sir. My name is unimportant. I am calling in reference to your announcement concerning the nature of the atom."

"Yes, indeed. A major leap forward in our understanding of the world around us, if I do say so myself."

Mihalik withheld his laughter. "Tell me, Dr. Marquand," he said, "what is the little football nucleus made of?"

There was a long silence on the line. Finally Marquand spoke up. "I was afraid someone would aks me that. Who is this? Is this Niels Bohr? Is that you, Niels?"

"Dr. Marquand, I am a traveler from the future. I come from the year 1996. In my time we know quite a bit more about the mysteries of the universe, and I can tell you candidly that the nucleus in not football-shaped. It looks like a little root beer barrel. And it's made up of protons and neutrons, which are in turn made up of even tinier things. There doesn't seem to be an end to it."

"I knew that already," said Marquand. "We just made that announcement to throw the Germans off the track. Say, are you really from the future?"

"Sure," said Mihalik, "Why would I lie?"

"Then you could tell me marvelous things. Would you answer one question for me? It would mean a great deal."

Mihalik hesitated, but then he re-

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called that this conversation was not really taking place, that at midnight Dr. Marquand would forget all about it. "Ask anything you like," he said.

"Will skirts ever get any shorter?" asked the scientist.

Mihalik hung up the telephone; so much for the day's fun. Now it was time to find lunch. He looked around the Fair. A seagull flew by overhead, the same seagull that flew by every day at precisely 4:25:18. That meant that he could meet a man named Eddie Rosen from Paramus, New Jersey and win a dollar from him. That would buy a pleasant meal and leave him enough change to go into the General Motors Futurama, which was his favorite exhibit.

The afternoon rain fell, but Mihalik ignored it. He saw Eddie Rosen walking toward him, just as he did every afternoon, but something new had been added: with a shock, the time-traveler saw five children holding the strings of helium-filled balloons. He had never seen the children before. "How can that be?" he thought. He felt a chill of apprehension. He had adjusted marvelously to being marooned; but if now the universe had decided to play impish tricks on him, by changing the natural way of things, Mihalik realized he was in serious danger. There was something about the balloons the children carried, something tantalizingly familiar....

Red, yellow, black, orange, green.

He knew that sequence. It represented something to him.

Red, yellow, black — a black balloon? Mihalik had never seen a child with a black balloon before. Now he was sure it was some sort of signal. But from whom? And what did it mean?

Friday, At Last

At 10:15, the forces of Earth began their defense of the home world once again. Mihalik watched it all wearily. He had twenty-two dollars in his pocket, and in one hour and forty-five minutes it would all melt away. He considered taking a taxi into Manhattan and getting blitzed in some dismal nightclub; he wouldn't need to worry about getting home, of course. That was a function of the universe. All around him anti-aircraft guns blasted, flames danced, fountains sprayed, and colored lights flashed. But somehow it was different. Mihalik came quickly to attention: *somehow it was different.* There was a rhythm and a pattern to the colored lights as they played upon the fountains. Blink, blink, blink, blink, blink. Instead of smoothly shifting melodies of color, the lights changed in regular, staccato order. Two colors, then a beat of darkness, then two more colors; the sequence repeated itself exactly, over and over. It had never done that any of the previous Thursday evenings.

Red, yellow, darkness, orange, green.

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It was the same sequence as the colors of the children's balloons.

Mihalik was a good man, a kind man, who would someday make a wonderful husband and father. Everyone liked him in 1996, and he felt certain that some of the folks in 1939 enjoyed talking with him, too; they might have become friends, if they didn't forget all about him each night at twelve o'clock. It caused the young man a great deal of mental anguish that some great cosmic force was toying with him, teasing him and torturing him, for unknown reasons. How could he hope to fight the power of natural law? It was a hopeless struggle; Mihalik had always avoided hopeless struggles before, because they looked bad on his resumé, but there seemed to be no escape from this one. He left the Martian invasion and went into the amusement area, Carnivaland. He thought the pure lunacy of the rides migh distract his mind.

He rode the Dodgem for fifteen cents and smashed into a car driven by a little old lady with blue hair; it didn't make him feel any better. He shattered china dishes with wooden balls. He rode through the Laff in the Dark and didn't laff. He dropped two-hundred-fifty feet on the Parachute Jump, yet the mystery still waited for him on the ground. He watched motorcycle riders challenge the Wall of Death but nobody crashed and it was almost midnight.

Then, like a wallop from Elektro, the Moto-Man, the significance of the balloons and lights hit him. Red, yellow, black, orange, green: that was the color sequence in a package of Chuckles. Mihalik was overcome with elation. It couldn't be coincidence; taking ten possible color choices, the number of permutations taken five at a time is given by the formula $M = n(n-1)(n-2) \ldots (n-p+1)$. Mihalik substituted 10 for n and 5 for p, multiplied it out, and arrived at the conclusion that the odds of the balloons appearing in just that sequence were 1 to 30,240; the odds of both the balloons and the colored lights repeating the sequences were therefore 1 in $(30{,}240)^2$. Did they have Chuckles in this primitive time? It made no difference — it could mean but one thing: the scientists of 1996 had not abandoned him. They were even now working feverishly to spring him from the temporal slammer. He hurried to gobble down the rest of a hamburger; it would vanish in less than fifteen seconds. As the second hand of his watch approached twelve, a voice called to him over the loudspeakers: "Mr. Frank Mihalik, please report—"

There was a flicker of amber light and all the rest of it.

"Ouch! Damn it!" said someone in the dark.

It hadn't been Mihalik's voice. "Who is it?" he asked.

"I can't see a damn thing," said the voice.

"Wait a minute, I know where the door is." Mihalik walked quickly to

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the exit and opened it; light flooded into the room.

There was another chair near his own. His girlfriend, Cheryl, was sitting on it.

"Cheryl!" he cried. "What are you doing here?"

"They sent me back, Frank, to let you know they're having a little trouble." She joined him by the door. He touched her long auburn hair and thrilled again to the vivacity in her green eyes. Her luscious gams were hidden by her green jumpsuit, but his memory of them was impeccable. She was some dish. He put his arms around her and held her for a moment. Then he gazed into her eyes and kissed her. It was an emotional moment.

"Oh, Cheryl," he said, "I've missed you so."

"I've missed you, Frank."

"How's Ray?"

"Ray's fine, he sends his regards."

Sadness filled Mihalik as he realized how Cheryl had sacrificed herself to bring a message that was rather self-evident. "We may never go home," he said. "You may be trapped here with me forever."

"It makes no difference to me where we are, Frank, as long as I'm with you. What is this place?"

Mihalik led her out into the morning sunshine. He put his arm around her shoulders and let her drink in the spectacle. "This," he announced grandly, "is the New York World's Fair of 1939!"

"Oh," she said, sighing.

"You sound disappointed."

She shrugged and smiled. "It's nothing," said Cheryl. "I was just hoping for something really exciting, like the Italian Renaissance."

"But this *is* really exciting! I have so much to show you. Wait until you see the thrills and wonders they've collected here."

They walked along Constitution Mall. Cheryl exclaimed over such things as the quaint clothing and odd architecture. "The buildings are so strange," she said. "They're built in laminated layers, like licorice Allsorts. They pile horizontal planes or stick them on end beside each other, and then round off all the edges."

"Yes," said Mihalik, "this is a safety-conscious age. These people are the sowers of the seeds of our world. These are our ancestors, Cheryl. Everything we are, we owe to them. Think of it: the Mediterranean still exists in this time. The Antarctic Inflow hasn't been discovered yet. There is no space travel, and people still haven't learned the terrible truth about vitamins.

"What a brave old world it is," said Cheryl. "I'm hungry."

Mihalik led her to the bench near the Washington statue, the one with the newspaper. They sat down; he held her hands in his strong grasp. "Cheryl," he said, "let me tell you of the nature of our imprisonment." And he sketched for her the immutable laws under which they had to live.

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"Why, that's not so awful," she cried. "We can make a wonderful life together. We can overcome anything, so long as we have each other."

"But we can't build anything. At midnight, everything we've accomplished is destroyed, leaving us with nothing. We return to the same point in time and space, and have to begin again."

Cheryl was not distressed. "I have confidence in you, Frank," she said. "Your mother told me what a clever little boy you were. She told me all about the summer you were a camp counsellor and the time you found that lost little kid in the woods. I'll put my well-being in your hands and trust to Providence that we'll be happy and healthy and everything. We'll earn money during the morning and spend it at night. Then we'll get plenty of rest, maintain a regimen of good grooming habits, and get married somehow. It will be swell, Frank, don't you see? How many people get the opportunity to honeymoon in the past?"

Mihalik said nothing for a few seconds. "We don't have any identification, Cheryl," he said. "We don't have our birth certificates or our nucleotide registers."

"What does that matter? We're young and we're in love, and this is the romantic past. These people of 1939 will move mountains to see that we're happy, just like in all those musical comedies."

"We'll see." Actually, Mihalik was touched by her faith. He didn't explain to her his theory that they had been trapped as a punishment for tampering with the mechanisms of time. He had come to believe that there were certain things that should not be messed with by the hands of men. He was sure that he was being punished, but he didn't know by whom — people of the far future? Nature? God? The Hershey Chocolate Company?

Cheryl was enthralled by the possibilities. "We have the chance to influence our own world, Frank," she said, indicating that she hadn't been paying close attention. "We can create an atmosphere of harmony and understanding, and steer the world away from the terrible course it will take without our guidance.. We can start right here, right in this Fair. We can give them a new path to follow that will alter the future. Can't you see it, Frank? Right over there, among those statues, there will rise a tall, sharp, clean building that will teach these primitives what they must learn if they are to avoid their fatal errors. I can see it as plain as day: a spacious central court decorated with cement swans, artistic but disciplined exhibition areas on both sides, every surface a different material, everything in cool pastel colors, a tribute to the after-dinner mint and Necco Wafers and—"

Mihalik slapped her face, hard; she stopped rambling. "I'm sorry," he said. "But if we're going to live in this place, we have to keep a deadly realistic outlook."

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"Yes, dear, I understand," she said. "Maybe we should just forget about the Necco Wafers."

"I have been thinking about leaving notes for people in the future to discover. They buried a time capsule in the Westinghouse Building. It will be opened in the year 6939."

Cheryl felt her jaw; nothing seemed broken. "6939? But we'll be dead by then, Frank," she said.

Mihalik nodded grimly. "I know that. But no doubt they will have perfected time travel, and they will be able to zip back and rescue us, then drop us off in 1996 on the way back to their own era."

"If that were true, they would have done it already. The fact that they haven't rescued us means that they won't rescue us."

Mihalik considered her objection. "But we haven't left the note yet," he said.

Cheryl explained it to him slowly, as if he were just another dim bulb from the past. "It's all the same whether we leave the note today or tomorrow or ten years from now. The note will get to 6939 at the same time, whenever we put it in the capsule, see?"

Mihalik squinted his eyes and tried to focus on her meaning. "Let's suppose I plan to put the note there this afternoon."

"Okay."

"At the moment I'm walking toward the time capsule, up there in the future it's already 6939."

"Uh huh."

"Then why do I have to bother putting the note in the capsule?"

Cheryl chewed her lip thoughtfully. She had been an adhesives major in college and it hadn't prepared her for this sort of reasoning. "Because," she said, "if you look at it that way, the note was in 6939 even before you came back here. The note has always been in 6939, but it hasn't been here. So you have to put the note in the capsule here before they can come get us."

Mihalik pretended that her explanation made sense. "But at midnight everything we do disappears. The note would disappear, too."

"Maybe it wouldn't," said Cheryl. "Maybe it would be safe in the time capsule."

"How are we going to get it into the time capsule?" asked Mihalik.

She looked exasperated. "I don't know," she snapped. "Why do *I* have to think of everything? *You're* the big hotshot explorer. *You* think of something for a change."

"Here comes Roman," he said. "I'll get us money for lunch."

The World of Tomorrow Delivers the Goods

There was no way for Mihalik to know how long he had been trapped in Thursday, July 27, 1939. It had been many months, but whether they to-

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talled a year he did not know. Cheryl had been with him at least six weeks, and she had adjusted to the routine of life. Indeed, she seemed to have a quicker grasp of the possibilities than he did. It was her suggestion that prompted him to give Dr. Zack Marquand another call.

And so, at quarter past twelve on the afternoon of July 27, Mihalik, Cheryl, and Mr. Marquand rode the subway out to the Fair — to Mañana Meadow, as it was called, to view A Happier Way of American Living Through A Recognition of the Interdependence of Men and the Building of A Better World of Tomorrow With the Tools of Today. They had virtually kidnapped the scientist, bribing him with bits of information, luring him with hints of the future. He hadn't visited the Fair yet, anyway, and like the hayseed from Indiana, he had heard all about the attractions that featured swell dames.

They got off the train and paid their way into the fairgrounds. "Now watch closely," said Mihalik. "Do you see that man over there? In about five seconds he's going to take off his suit coat and a wallet will fall on the ground."

Dr. Marquand said nothing. In a few seconds, just as Mihalik described, the coat came off and the wallet fell. "How did you know that?" asked Marquand.

Mihalik shrugged. "I've seen it happen again and again, every day at just this hour. I've lived through this day hundreds of times. I know exactly what is going to happen. Look, quickly, over there. That kid with the candy cigarette in his mouth is going to lose his balloon. See? And in about ten seconds a band will start playing some march."

"The Thunderer," said Cheryl.

"Great Caesar's Ghost!" cried Dr. Marquand, when the band started playing. "You've persuaded me. You are indeed travelers from the future. But how can I help you?"

They walked slowly along the avenue, past the statues of the Four Freedoms. "The crew in our time gave me a message," said Cheryl. "They haven't been able to return Frank and me to our own era because they can't overcome something they call temporal inertia. No matter how much energy they pump into their apparatus, they can't budge us from the past. That has to be done from this side. What you have to do is find some way of giving us just a tiny shove, and then the people in 1996 will be able to recover us easily."

Dr. Marquand stared at a young woman straightening the seams of her silk stockings. "Then what we need is a source of great energy," he said, "enough energy to topple you out of the space-time trap. Too bad we don't have that cobalt bomb you told me about."

Mihalik stopped to win a dollar from a young married couple he had

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come to know and like. He told them their names, their address, the names of their parents, the years they graduated from high school, whom they voted for in the last election, where they had spent their honeymoon, and the location of a strawberry birthmark on the young woman's body. He came back and gave the dollar to the scientist. "Does it have to be something like an explosion?" he asked. "Maybe they could drop us off a building or something."

"I'd rather be blown up all at once," said Cheryl.

"I suspect," said Dr. Marquand, "that there's something here at the Fair that would serve us. Let me think.... I've seen pictures in the newspapers — I know! The General Electric building! Let's go."

Cheryl wanted to pick up a souvenir for Ray, who would be disappointed if they returned without bringing him anything. "He'll like this," she said. It was a pin from the General Motors Futurama that said *I Have Seen The Future*. It was poignantly appropriate.

"He'll get a kick out of that," said Mihalik.

The two chronoventurers walked hand in hand. Mihalik took the opportunity to say goodbye to all the people he had come to know here on Day One; of course, none of them knew who he was, but they all acted polite, if uncomfortable.

"What a sweet age this is," murmured Cheryl. "How they slumber unaware. There are no monostellaphenazide leaks, no Chou-Tsien plague, no tickworms in the Midwest, no messages from Sirius to worry about."

"It isn't *all* wonderful," said Marquand. "We have our share of worries, too."

Mihalik paused to take a last look around the Fair. "It's been wonderful," he said, "But I kind of look forward to not knowing what's going to happen next. Dr. Marquand, do you want us to tell you what is going to happen to your world?"

The scientist thought for a moment. "It would give me a peculiar responsibility," he said. "It could be a terrible secret to know ahead of time, a fearful curse. But why not? What the hell, go ahead. Tell me."

Mihalik and Cheryl took turns filling in the history of the world, as much as they could recall, from 1939 to 1980. Mihalik was able to remember some of the winners of certain sporting events as well as financial trends during those decades. "In 1980, the presidential election will be won by Ronald Rea...."

"Who cares?" said Marquand. "I'll probably be dead by then. Here we are, the General Electric exhibit."

They went in. Dr. Marquand's reputation allowed them to examine the machinery used in the demonstrations of artificial lightning — really, just a static electricity generator that produced dramatic displays of metal-vaporizing and timber-shattering. The center-

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piece of the demonstration was an arc of ten million volts which leaped thirty feet from one pole to another. "Gee," murmured Cheryl.

"Yes," said Dr. Marquand soberly, "science is our friend; but we must be careful, for without a sense of responsibility the playthings we create may become our deadliest enemies."

"Like nuclear energy, for instance," said Mihalik.

"Well," said the physicist, "I was thinking of the martini and the gimlet, myself. There won't be another exhibition here for almost fifteen minutes. Let's position you on that target pole and whip a couple of bolts at you. That ought to do the trick."

Cheryl slipped her hand into Mihalik's. "Are you afraid?" she whispered.

"Not at all," said Mihalik. He laughed in the face of death.

"If this doesn't work," said Dr. Marquand respectfully, "it will char you into a little pile of black powder. You're a very brave man."

Mihalik laughed again. "We'll try anything, sir," he said. "We're from the future."

"Yes, I keep forgetting. Okay, hold still. I'm all ready here. Before you go, however, there's something I want to ask you. Do you know which of all the different versions of today will be the real one? The one everybody will remember?"

Mihalik shook his head. Cheryl had no answer, either.

"Another thing," asked Marquand. "Why do sweets play such an important part in your lives? Is there some situation in the future that makes candy more valuable that it is today?"

Mihalik looked at Cheryl. "Dr. Marquand," he said, "we can't answer that, either. All we know is that over the years the manufacturers have become immensely powerful. It began during the Second World War, I think. We don't know how or why, but something started civilization on the road to what, in 1996, amounts to a virtual sucrocracy. It is a mystery that baffles our historians."

"Thank you," said Marquand. "I will watch the trend carefully. Knowing about it will guarantee me security in my old age. Now, hold very still...."

The technology of the past exploded upon Mihalik and Cheryl; ten million volts of blazing lightning smote them, but all they experienced was a flicker of amber light....

With an echo of thunder in their ears, they fell to the floor. Both were dazed and groggy. They opened their eyes. They were no longer in the General Electric building. They were now in a small room that appeared to be someone's office. There was a desk and a filing cabinet, a telephone, a typewriter on a small stand, and a framed picture of the Man from Mars — the chairman of the candy company who had become boss of the world years ago. "We're back," whispered Mihalik. "Such a miracle as this is evidence of

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the secret hand of Providence governing the world, that the eye of an infinite power searches into the remotest corner of space and time, and sends help to the miserable whenever it pleases."

"Well," said Cheryl, "I give a lot of credit to Dr. Marquand, too."

"Or else it was all just a lucky accident. I wonder whatever happened to Marquand, that primitive genius. We will have to find out. But for now, it's enough just to rejoin our world and our own time. Ray will be glad to see us; I have to admit that I've missed his ugly mug. Say, did that pin come with you through time?"

Cheryl opened her hand; the souvenir was gone. "He'll understand," she said sadly. "I must have dropped it."

"Tough break, kid."

"I wonder about something, Frank. Do you suppose that our telling Dr. Marquand about candy could be what actually began the trend? That somehow we influenced our own present by going into the past?"

"You mean that if we hadn't told him about it, when we came back here it would all be some other way?"

Cheryl nodded.

"What difference does it make?" he asked. "If it hadn't been candy, it

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would have been something else. Something worse, like green vegetables or fossil fuels."

"You're right, Frank. I'm lucky to be your girlfriend."

Mihalik smiled.

They went to the door of the office. He put his hand on the knob. "We've left the sepia-tinted days of yesteryear," he said. "It was fun and it was terrifying, but now we're safely home. Once we step through this door, we'll be back in our very own dull, drab, nougat-centered, cavity-prone World of Tomorrow."

"Can't you wait just a moment?" asked Cheryl. She pressed her warm, moist lips against his in a lingering kiss.

Mihalik pulled away. "No," he said decisively, "I'd like to stay here with you, but I have a duty to the project. I'm crazy about you, Cheryl, but you must respect my moral obligation."

"I do, Frank, really. I'm sorry for acting so foolish."

So together they left the office and walked into the uncertainty of the rest of their lives. That, in the final analysis, is the great adventure in which each of us takes part: what more courageous thing is there, after all, than facing the unknown we all share, the danger and joy that awaits us in the unread pages of the Book of the Future....

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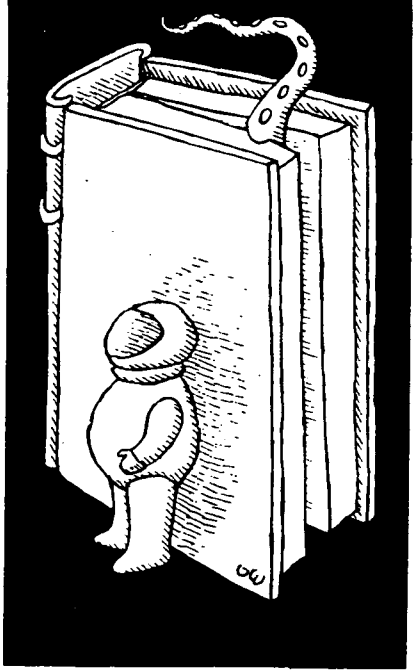

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

Against Infinity, Greg Benford, Timescape, $14.95

The Wind From a Burning Woman, Greg Bear, Arkham House, $13.95

Cinnabar, Edward Bryant, Bantam, $2.50

The Floating Gods, M. John Harrison, Timescape, $2.50

There are those who claim SF is a limited genre of wish-fulfillment action dramas.

Let us look at some lions, their work.

Gregory Benford's *Against Infinity*, to take the most recent book first, is likely to be considered one of the best SF novels of 1983. It certainly deserves to. Set on a colonized Ganymede in the earliest days of that Jovian satellite's terraforming, the book proceeds in a straight line of powerful narrative, telling the story of Manuel Lopez, whose life is tied inextricably with that of old Matt Bohles and of Aleph, the totally self-possessed alien artifact that has been wandering the moon for billions of years.

It begins when Manuel is thirteen, taken for the first time out into the wastelands beyond Sidon Settlement. He is a member of a hunting party of men. Ostensibly out just to cull the synthetic life-forms that have been set loose to graze on the Ganymedan ecology and thus transform it, he then becomes aware of Aleph as a presence.

That presence looms over the men, coloring every thought and deed. Alien

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artifacts have been found all over the moons of Jupiter, all ancient, all enigmatic. But only Aleph moves, pursuing its mysterious courses through the deeps, sinking through the rock and ice, moling, bursting unpredictably out of canyon walls, occasionally brushing aside the works of mankind, and men, and their cyborg hunting animals, never responding in the slightest to any human attempt at contact or study, surfacing at its own need, sounding down into the depths again at its own mercy, inviolate.

Manuel's father, Colonel Lopez, is a commanding figure, stern and lawgiving, marshalling the resources of his men in the face of Ganymede's implacable environment. Sidon Settlement lives constantly on the thin edge of insufficiency. Life is not cruel; it is doomed unless meticulously cared for. So what fondness there may be between the Colonel and Manuel is far less accessible to the boy than is the tutelage offered by Old Matt, who assumes the role of a grandfather. One arm synthoed, one totally artificial, with parts of his face and torso replaced by metal and ceramic, Old Matt knows what the fatal mistakes are. More important, over the years as Aleph looms larger and larger in their lives, he and Manuel — and a ravening maniac named Eagle, reconstructed from the partial brain of a human and given a killer body — gradually work out a way to stop Aleph.

The thing of it is, of course, that since Aleph is the men's obsession, it's thus part of Manuel's manhood as he accesses toward it. True, there is a need to weed out the counterproductive mutants from the packs of laboratory life-forms that are chewing Ganymede toward a more hospitable ecology. But in fact these expeditions in every rational way represent an unjustifiable waste of Sidon Settlement's resources.

There is a clue to what they really mean; whenever Aleph appears, it immediately becomes the focus of a barrage of weaponry, even though everyone knows full well that no weapon has ever had the slightest effect on it. The scenes in which the men and animals plunge into tumultuous, shouting pursuit of the uncaring artifact contain some of the most effective and evocative writing in a powerfully evocative book. Not since Ahab thrust his lance at the lightning and swore the white whale's doom have I read anything much like it.

And that brings me to my other point, which is that I don't know how much this is a good book in its own right and how much it reminds me of a good book. This is a very important point.

I say I don't know. I suspect. I suspect this is a very good book in its own right. Benford, who has just been getting better and better, has here evolved into a prose stylist who creates his effects in the way the really good writers do. He does it not with words, per se, but with patterns of words:

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In the thick, close air of the cabin the stench and sweat of the men seemed to tighten around him, and he contented himself with watching out the big ports, where the augmented and servo'd animals rumpused about on the pocked plain. A dime-sized sun struck colors from their carapaces, steels gleaming blue-green, the ceramics a clammy yellow. They frolicked at being out of Sidon Settlement again, beyond the domes where they bent their backs at agro work.... But none of that gave the zest of romping free in the thin air outside, scampering around the lumbering crawler treads, whistling and chattering and sending their clipped cries to each other in the stinging cold.

Here is how Aleph first emerges in Manuel's consciousness, and in ours:

The talk began again. It was, as usual, about policing the jackrabs and rockeaters and the ammonia-soaked scooters and the crawlies that processed methane, for that was the ostensible purpose of this annual expedition. But soon the talk drifted, as though drawn by the same current that ran through all of them, to the best game of all, the best subject as the Settlement fell behind, recollection floating up in them like bubbles breaking on the surface of a deep pond. Even though still a boy, he heard the tales in squatters' shacks barely able to hold their pressure; and in the agro domes; in work sheds rank with metal shavings and sour spit.... He sensed that something was waiting for him when he would at last be allowed to come out from the small and insignificant encrustations that man had spattered over the mute face of Ganymede, come out to take part in the pruning of the small creatures and find in the vast wastes the thing that waited.... They called it Aleph.

Now that, I submit, is uncommon writing about an uncommon thing. Benford, a physicist by trade, has not only emerged as the latest in a long but slim line of scientist-poets but also as one who promises to be one of the best ever. If I were trapped into some fresh episode of the timeworn debate about whether SF and the "Mainstream" will ever merge, I would bring forward ex-Fan Benford and rest my case.

But I know what a hostile critic could say. He could say that Benford is too conscious of precursors to be *sui generis;* that his book is reminiscent of Hemingway's *The Old Man and The Sea,* and Faulkner's "The Bear," and of course *Moby Dick* (and even more so of Robert Ruark's *The Old Man and the Boy*), and thus is good by virtue of its models, but only by virtue of its models.

The question comes down to this: given a long, honorable literary tradition of rite-of-passage stories built around the metaphor of the hunt, is an SF story made any the less by being aware of that tradition? If Hemingway is allowed to model on Melville,* why isn't Benford?

* * *

**And if Nathaniel Hawthorne's friend Herman is allowed to try his hand at some tales verging as close to frank SF as much of Hawthorne does.*

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Let's look at Greg Bear's *The Wind from a Burning Woman*.

This is a handsome book, as Arkham House books tend to be; well-designed, substantial in appearance, Smythe-sewn in actual boards and cloth, very ingeniously illustrated by Dennis Neal Smith. And it may also be something else that a few Arkham House books are; it may contain a text that lies outside the boundaries of genre publishing. It may.

In the time-honored tradition, this is a story collection that attempts to resemble a novel until the last possible moment.* It contains six longish pieces, ranging up from 1978, all six of them from impeccable "newsstand SF" sources — three magazines, and three anthologies edited by either Robert Silverberg or Terry Carr. Yet what they most resemble, title story included, are literary magazine short stories.

The title story is ostensibly hard SF, from *Analog*, about the day a terrorist can literally destroy the world. "The White Horse Child" appears to be a fantasy about a haunted Midwestern farming-community boy. "Petra" — well, Hawthorne would recognize "Petra," but in outline it's about a gargoyle who comes to life; "Scattershot" is an *Astounding*-type gimmick tale about a starship scrambled in hyperspace; "Mandala" is a chapter out of *Strength of Stones*, originally published as a freestanding story about an android who doesn't know it, and "Hardfought" is about how we tend to become like our enemies, and uses the frequently resorted-to setting of a war between humans and a totally alien starfaring race.

Our convenient straw man, the previously introduced hostile critic, could point to the solidly generic armatures on which these stories are erected and claim that thereby all of Bear's other ingenuities are hopelessly tainted; could claim, in other words, that Bear is merely producing variations on standard themes. Worse, unlike Benford who at least has the grace to borrow from classical precursors, Bear goes back to models like van Vogt's lumbering Rull-war series, and "Darrel T. Langart" with "Sound Decision" from the 1950s *Astounding*.

Well, maybe worse, although I think our critic is trying to have something both ways, there. But I note he did at least bow to Bear's ingenuities, which I — the friendly critic — would prefer to describe as evidences of first-rate literary talent.

I have not, for instance, read anything like "The White Horse Child" since an early Gene Wolfe story, ostensibly fantasy, about a boy who comes back to the Midwest after having defected in Korea. And when I read

Incidently, it was while doing this column that I finally realized there is no Hugo, no Nebula, no Howard, no Balrog, for "Best Book." There is no way for a publisher and editor, no matter how ingenious and conscientious, to gain special recognition for any prose book that is not a novel.

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that one, many years ago, it at once became clear to me that some day we would hear more from Wolfe. We have, of course, heard more from Bear already — *Strength of Stones* and the outré *Beyond Heaven's River*, for two — but although the existing Bear novels promise much, what they promise is not as clear as what this story promises, or what is very nearly explicit in "Hardfought," a novella which is the most recent of these pieces and is eligible for a 1983 award, presumably in the "novelette" categories.

What Bear is trying to write about is precisely what Benford is trying to write about, what some of those guys hanging around Melville's place were trying to write about, and what even the most veritable schlockmeister cannot help but occasionally resonate to. What is it? Well:

Cinnabar, by Edward Bryant, may still be available in the Bantam second printing of January, 1983, or in the 1976 Macmillan hardcover or the 1977 first Bantam reprint. This, too, is a short-story collection, made even more novelistic by consisting of stories all set in a city at the end of time and by arranging the stories in chronological order. The copyright dates range from 1971 to '76.

Bryant has been an up-and-coming writer for a long time, now, and it may very well be that to take an appropriate permanent place in some pantheon he will have to do the trick Ray Bradbury and Harlan Ellison have done. It's hard, not being a novelist.

But, however that is, Bryant's writing from the first moment he emerged from the Clarion SF-writing Workshop has been marked by his consciousness of literature beyond those fostered by Hugo Gernsback and John Campbell or Horace Gold. In that respect, he is no different from Bear or Benford; what he is, is much sooner.

Not the first of his kind, but nearly so, and most nearly typical of the kind, Bryant consistently uses the on-the-edge-of-satire brittle style made popular in the literary magazines since World War II, consistently selects classical archetypes for his characters, and depends heavily on metaphorical devices to give his plots propulsion. *Cinnabar* is by no means the novel it sometimes pretends to be, despite common characters in the stories and the common setting. The stories do not build to a climatic recapitulation of a major theme. Instead, despite whatever incident each of them is ostensibly about, each makes the same thematic statement complete in itself. *Cinnabar* is a hologrammatic book, like *The Wind From a Burning Woman;* any of its pieces conveys the whole message.

What message? Well, here is a city "at the end of time," and in that respect it's not much different from scores of such cities as depicted in SF at least since Arthur C. Clarke's "complete" *Startling Stories* "novel," *Against the*

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*Fall of Night,** not much different from the haunted urbs of H.G. Wells or Don A. Stuart's "Twilight," seen again more recently in the work of Michael Moorcock and M. John Harrison, in George R.R. Martin, and in Terry Carr's *Cirque*. Clearly, our entire field has been this way before, obsessively, and the thing we have to deduce is what is meant by a city at the end of time.

Such a city, perhaps the best of recent models of such cities, is Harrison's Viriconium, in which he set two earlier novels, *The Pastel City* and *A Storm of Wings*. The third book was published in England by Gollancz as *In Viriconium* and now is here as a Timescape paperback "original" under the title *The Floating Gods*. (Which for my money means it's still in search of its best title.)

The Floating Gods, with a cover designed to reinforce the suggestion of occultism, is an exaggerated instance of the sort of literary mannerism that Bryant shares, Bear flirts with, and Benford consciously avoids.# Not too surprising, from an individual who was once literary editor of *New Worlds*, the journal that started us all into awareness of the "New Wave." It is very much its own novel in sum, however; so much so that it even separates rather cleanly from two predecessors to which it is not, in truth, a sequel anywhere near as much as it is a formally stated antithesis.

What in the *world* does he mean by that? Well, the Viriconium of the two early books was a science fiction Viriconium analogous to Cinnabar, whereas this one is fantaisiacal, analogous *perhaps* to Clarke's Dictum about advanced science becoming objectively indistinguishable from magic. In terms of the two previous books, this story need not have been set in Viriconium at all, but in some other city of desuetude. (In which case, why *not* Viriconium, since they are all generic, our friendly critic interjects.)

The Viriconium of the earlier work is literally a city so old that the Universe is running out of time, and hence is having problems keeping space stabilized. Some of the characters are created by impressing their physical matrices with the personalities of long-dead contenders in forgotten struggles that have left Earth littered with essentially alien artifacts. The line between flesh and metal — and between human and inhuman substance of any sort — is blurring hopelessly. Confused armies clash in impenetrable fog and smoke, and there are rumors of insectile aliens which prove gruesomely true.

The Floating Gods has nothing rec-

**Later a redrafted novel as* The City and the Stars *and a fleshout of the original as a Gnome Press book,* Against the Fall of Night.

#If it were only M. John Barrison! I could thus have named SF's own group of Killer B's.

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ollectible in common with that Viriconium except the name of the urb and one metal feather, plus tenuous rumors that some of the birds in the remoter ruined towers are of metal. It has no characters ostensibly in common with the previous books. The metal feather argues that the setting is later in time than *A Storm of Wings*, but if so then the mood is at sharp variance with the future to be expected from the previously depicted circumstances. When last seen, Viriconium was locked in material clashes by night; now it is slowly subsiding under the inleaching tide of the Plague Zone — an upwelling of bad luck and ill health, mental confusion and ennui that is creeping up from the poor quarters into the aristocratic heights of the city, something like the node of fatality that progresses through time in *The Anti-Death League*.

In many ways, this Viriconium is indistinguishable from Marrakesh — either the real one or as borrowed for the setting of George R.R. Martin short stories of the 1970s — its appurtenances and characters are as Medieval as those in Fritz Leiber's Nehwon or Delaney's Neveryon. The significant difference, in terms of individualizing this book, is the presence of the two Barley brothers, Gog and Matey.

They are a pair of louts, roistering about, playing repulsive pranks, sparking commotion. They are constantly underfoot while protagonist Ashlyme, the popular portraitist, tries vainly to rescue from the Plague Zone the genius graphic artist Audsley King, whom the citizens of Viriconium prize mainly for her incidental work, such as designs for Paulinus Rack's constantly delayed production of *Die Traumunden Knaben* or *The Dreaming Boys*. Aided by the astronomer *manque*, Emmet Buffo, and bedevilled by the Barley brothers' mascot, a megalomaniacal dwarf styled The Grand Cairo, Ashlyme in eventually making no progress at all causes the brothers to be revealed as what they have been ridiculously asserted to be — the pair of gods who created Viriconium. You like that?

I like that. If I insisted on stories that make sense the first time through — I do, very much, prefer them, but I make exceptions — I certainly wouldn't. But I do. You follow that? Try following this:

"The dreaming boys" is "die traumenden knaben" in any form of German I'm aware of. German being the sort of language it is, die traumunden knaben" can mean "the true-mouths lads," "the sorrow-orifices boys," or can be a slightly misliterated "the dreams and then boys." And that's just the literal set of possibilities, never mind idiomatic variants in either general German or dialect and/or slang.

Whatever, Harrison gives Rack's production title considerable emphasis in the story; it's doing some kind of work. And, no, the mis-spelling is not a typo. It appears consistently in both editions, and it appears often. It almost certainly has to be deliberate.

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What particular jape is Harrison engaged in here? Beats me. It may even, despite the unlikelihood, be a typo, or some Gollancz editor's misapprehension that has been blindly followed by Timescape's compositors, who indeed preserve all the British spellings for "colour," "flavour," and the like. The thing is, there is already so much multilevel stuff going on in the prose that every idiosyncrasy requires analysis, and some analyses can lift you straight off the ground and up into the fog and smoke.

That is the mark of an attempt at conscious literature, and while Harrison is one of our extreme practitioners, none of the other three writers dealt with here are free of this effect. To the extent that reasonable thought and care fail to resolve some of these problems of comprehension, some of these attempts are not wholly successful, just as most attempts at a plain tale plainly told are not fully successful.

There are some problems with grasping exactly what *Against Infinity* is trying to say about the value of humankind's attempt to remold the Universe for its own benefit, even though the portrait of Manuel Lopez is a clear and remarkably effective one, against a beautifully realized and poetically described background.

There are some problems with some of the stories in *The Wind From a Burning Woman*, occasioned by Bear's chronic reluctance to actually spell out the events of his story-endings. Bear is not unique among us in displaying this curious sort of reticence, which I think is occasioned by shying away from making irrevocable commitments. If you don't lock yourself into a clearcut resolution, you're more free to scatter enigmatic opacities into the narrative; they can be pretty and they might mean something profound. But there is no problem in realizing that Bear is always deeply and intelligently concerned with the impact on human beings, each of whom is an individual, of the discovery we all make — that we are ruled by the operation of a Universe that cares nothing about us one way or the other, and in response to which the mass of individuals form notions that oppress the individual.

The city at the end of time, inhabited by archetypical people, is the same as the enigmatic alien artifact. It stands for all the things that are forever beyond us or claim to be so. It's no accident that the characters in *Cinnabar* are often highly skilled and highly regarded, but always at the mercy of circumstances that *seem* to be lawful within some format that can only be glimpsed. It's no accident that Harrison (A) tries to account for Viriconium by ascribing to it a First Cause in the form of the twinned gods, but (B) makes the Cause itself capricious.

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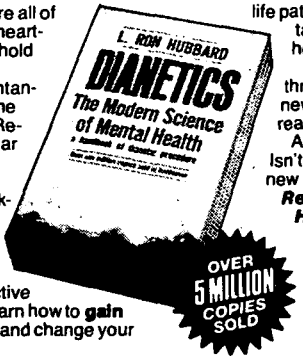

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that may not always make full contact with the reader, but are clearly under the creator's full if on occasion mistaken control, and, incidentally, books which display their authors' notably broad acquaintance with all of literature and its range. Are they good?

Yes, they're very good. The better question, though, is why are they good in the way they are? It's the better question because the average Star Trek fan or the dedicated reader of the Dumarest of Terra series is going to be almighty puzzled by them. Depending on the condition of his liver, he may even feel entitled to some fulminade about "arty" SF, its impropriety.

Well, I'm not positive why they're good the way they are, just as I only "know" they're good in any way at all; I can't positively diagram how they're good. But I am positive that it seems quite clear to me SF in its ultimate nature leads its practitioners to the big question: Why is it that we are mindful of the Universe, when clearly it does not know we are within it? That gets you into wondering if there *is* some purpose to intelligence, to tenacity and curiousity, and what the ultimate end of it all will be. And that, I think, eventually forces some of our practitioners to go beyond bang bang stories, and even beyond pretentiously shallow work, which does mean they leave some portion of the audience behind. Still, it's good that they do it.

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Barbara Owens wrote "Happy Birthday, Little Elroy" (September 1982). Her new story concerns a tired country fair with one incredible exhibit...

Professors Smitt's Amazing Tiny Town

BY

BARBARA OWENS

On the day that Libertini's Extravaganza set up its tired tents and sideshows in a pasture behind the school's athletic field, half of Hickory turned out to welcome it to town.

Posters had teased them for weeks — livening up telephone poles, fences, barns, and sheds, hot pink letters shouting from every merchant's window. Now, finally, it was there — for six glorious days — and Hickory was determined to squeeze the most from every minute of its stay.

Ruth Ann had been there, part of the crowd following its triumphant progress through town. But she'd hung back at the pasture's edge, watching the confusion — sweating workers, the people of Hickory milling happily underfoot. Later. When it was dark and the magic would be there. When the music and colors blotted out Hickory and the surrounding dry countryside and she could pretend she was in another world. Resolute, she had turned away.

And now, in the blue transition from dusk to dark, she stood inside the main gate with her friend Judy, the wonderful madness of the midway hers for the price of a smeared gray ticket. One hand pressed against the woefully flat place over her heart, clinically checking its accelerated beat.

"Oh, Judy. Look. The lights. It's like a fairyland."

"Yeah." Judy grinned, bunching her wide perspiring face into nothing but cheeks. "Let's go. I saw some guys out here this morning — they were gorgeous! One had tattoos, snakes and things, all over his back. Come on, we only got six days!"

"What?" Ruth Ann's feet were moving, her eyes already glazed from the mystic power pouring from musi

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and lights and smells. "What did you say?"

"Guys, Ruth Ann. Get with it — guys! Don't you know thirteen's the beginning of our wild and crazy years?"

Pressed together, they plunged into the midway. Surely everyone from Hickory was there. Ordinarily stolid faces wore unused smiles; beery breath hung in the hot, close air; serious hard-working men hurled objects at other objects for elusive prizes and threw up in the shadows after staggering off the Roll-O-Plane. Tired, drawn women carrying sleeping babies giggled like girls, and everywhere small children darted like fireflies, gripped by a hysteria that seemed about to tear them from solid ground and fling them into some mysterious orbit in the black night sky.

Ruth Ann only half saw them. Hickory people were familiar. It was the mystery and excitement of the carnival that she allowed to take her, sinking into her pores like life-saving moisture. She felt herself glow, and she let Judy lead her — into cheap little show tents, onto death-defying rides. She obeyed barkers' entreaties and won a gaudy felt hat. It came down to her ears, and she wore it while she ate cotton candy and sno-cones and corn dogs and tacos and peanuts and taffy, and swigged Cokes and root beer and orange juice and punch. Judy turned pale after her third candy apple and excused herself into a secluded place. Ruth Ann waited with a smile — she couldn't seem to stop smiling — and when Judy didn't return, Ruth Ann ventured into the shadowy soft edges of the midway to find her.

"Judy? You O.K.?"

"Now I am."

Her friend was propped against the side of a truck — its bulk rose over them, high and wide, as big as a moving van. Golden sides shimmered in reflected light from the midway; giant red letters proclaimed it to be PROFESSOR SMITT'S AMAZING TINY TOWN.

"What's this?"

"What's what?"

"This truck." Ruth Ann moved down its side.

"I don't know. Just a port in a storm."

Steps led to a small door cut in the van's rear — a feeble light illuminated the sign: "Admission — 50 cents."

"Let's go in."

"Aw, Ruth Ann, I—"

Ruth Ann was on the steps. "Come on! I don't want to miss anything. I saw that awful two-headed baby in a bottle with you. Come on!"

Reluctantly, Judy joined her. "O.K., but after this I'm going home. I never did find the guy with the snakes."

Inside the door, a tall, pimply boy took their money and pulled aside a curtain that masked the main part of the van.

"Wait till your eyes get used to the light," he said. He sounded bored.

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Beyond the curtain, the van's interior was dim, lit only from small neon tubes circling its top. As Ruth Ann's eyes adjusted, she saw a long, narrow table stretching away toward the cab. It looked at least thirty feet long, waist-high, its rim bolstered by a sturdy wall-like addition hiding, for the moment, its contents from view. Light glowed from the inside wall and, as Ruth Ann started toward it, her foot met with a small riser and she stumbled; instinctively, she clutched at the wall.

"Young lady! You are about to share an old man's lifework. Watch your step, please. Carelessness means danger here."

He looked like a lifeguard, perched on a seat built high into one of the van's side walls. Chastened, Ruth Ann peered up at him through the shadows.

"I — I'm sorry. I didn't see the step."

"That is the viewing platform, child. Take your time, but be aware of the delicacy of what you will see. There is none other like it in the world. Step carefully, and do not put your hands across the wall."

He was old, gray-bearded and shaggy-haired, but his voice was kind, and Ruth Ann's embarrassment eased.

"O.K. Thank you."

In one hand he held a long, flexible rod. He lifted it now, sweeping it across the table's top, its end dipping gracefully out of sight.

"Come. See the beauty of my town. I assure you, you will not be disappointed."

Now Ruth Ann became aware of other people in the van, a handful far down the table's side, faces raised briefly toward her, reflecting golden light from the display. Hurriedly, she stepped onto the narrow platform. Professor Smitt's pride came into view.

After the first instant's recognition, Ruth Ann forgot everything except the enchantment spread before her. The other viewers, the van, Professor Smitt, everything faded.

"Oh jeez," Judy muttered into her ear. "It's just one of those miniature things. I've seen them before."

Ruth Ann didn't answer. The display almost filled the van's interior, permitting only scant passage around its sides. It was complete and detailed, a view of another world as Ruth Ann imagined it must and should have been, a beautiful turn-of-the-century countryside intercepted in its middle by a village halfway down its length.

Directly before her, a shallow stream meandered through a green countryside. Real water, and it gurgled as it flowed between its banks. Its pebbled bottom could be seen clearly, and Ruth Ann thought she saw tiny dark slivers dart in its depths. A foot or so beyond the wall, a country lane crossed it and, sitting on the edge of the lane's flat bridge, was a boy. His clothing was made of real cloth — dark trousers and blue shirt; he sported a battered straw hat on his head. A pole

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dangled between his bare feet and, as Ruth Ann watched, he raised it suddenly and one of the tiny dark slivers wiggled from its tip.

"Judy! Look! Did you see that?"

The boy's head rose. He took off his hat and wiped his forehead. Ruth Ann leaned both elbows on the wall to stare. The little figure moved smoothly, not mechanically, and it looked real, not doll-like or plastic. She saw skin and eyes and hair — just like hers — and he wasn't more than three inches tall. The hat went on, the pole dipped again to the water, and the boy leaned forward to watch. The original pose — heart pounding, Ruth Ann gave him one last look and moved on.

There was too much to see. She inched past tiny ponds, trees, two young people in old-fashioned clothing having a picnic in a field. Everything looked real. She knew if she were allowed to feel the trees, the grass, they'd be cool and natural to the touch. As the town drew near, she watched a man in shirtsleeves working his garden with a hand plow — Ruth Ann imagined she saw minute drops of moisture on his face and neck. As she passed, a tantalizing odor of new earth drifted over the wall.

She wanted to stop long moments before everything, stare until it was memorized, but there were more people in the van now — figures had moved in behind, and she felt hurried, forced to keep moving, straining to absorb as many details as she could in passing.

The town lay below. Quiet streets, quaint, charming houses. Real pinpoint flowers, she *knew* it. Lighted windows allowing glimpses of tiny moving figures inside. People strolled along wooden sidewalks, gathering into little groups to converse, then part. They appeared to chat over fences, passed in and out of cunning little shops, their movements natural.

Outside the firehouse, three firemen endlessly polished an old-fashioned fire truck. From her house across the street, a young girl in a long white ruffled dress watched them. She swung gently in a porch swing, twirling a lazy parasol over her shoulder. Outside her front fence, a dignified gentleman walked a tiny brown dog. The dog pulled at its leash, dancing in circles. The man tipped his hat to the girl on the swing — he had curly light hair and a moustache. Ruth Ann leaned closer. He reminded her of — he looked like—

"Well, if it isn't pigface and ratface. Keep it moving, losers, you're holding up the line."

Ruth Ann jumped, startled from the magic of the little world. A familiar face grinned over Judy's shoulder — Kenny Lake, senior center of the basketball team. And behind him — Ruth Ann's heart dropped — the red hair and cool green eyes of Cassie Ryan. Cassie seemed to light up the van, and her eyes barely suppressed a smile as Ruth Ann's face began to burn.

"Hear me, losers? Get your sorry selves in gear."

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Judy muttered something about "pigface," but Ruth Ann could say nothing. Kenny Lake was special, one of the chosen ones. Yet she couldn't keep herself from looking full on Cassie and saying, "Hi."

"Hey, Ruth Ann, how you doin'?" Cassie responded in a bored voice.

The magic was gone. Of all people to catch her mooning over a toy town, Cassie Ryan was the worst possible choice. Crowding people ahead, Ruth Ann moved blindly around the remainder of Professor Smitt's town and stumbled down the steps into the darkness outside. She waited for Judy in the shadows, fiercely blinking back tears.

Cassie Ryan. What had happened? Ruth Ann still couldn't understand it. She and Cassie had lived next door to one another all their lives, been inseparable, shared everything — Ruth Ann treasured Cassie's friendship more than any possession she owned.

Then it changed. Almost overnight Cassie filled out in all the places she was supposed to and, with her red hair and green eyes, easily became one of the chosen ones. She acquired Kenny, a senior, for a boyfriend and would be the only freshman cheerleader on the Hickory High squad when school started in the fall. She had parties at her house at least once a week and avoided Ruth Ann openly. Ruth Ann spent evenings listening to the music and fun next door and staring at her plain, shapeless image in the mirror. She wondered what was wrong and wished Cassie Ryan were still her best friend more than anything else in the world.

"Hey, look what I got." Judy appeared beside her, holding a small figure in her hand. "That pimply guy was selling them. It's one of the firemen, see?"

Ruth Ann looked at her friend's broad face and bulging body and saw what Kenny and all the others saw. Pigface and ratface — a couple of losers. Dully she examined the cheap plastic replica of the figure inside. His clothes were painted on, his face was flat and lifeless, with two uneven black dots for eyes.

"He's not the same," she said, and felt her heart hesitate in its rhythm. "He's nowhere near the same." Their walk home through the silent town was uncomfortable and subdued.

When Mama asked her to take Donna to the carnival the next afternoon, at first Ruth Ann was reluctant. Then she thought of the golden van, holding its enchanted world inside its cool darkness, and acquiesced.

"I want five rides on the Ferris wheel," Donna announced as the sunlit midway opened before them. "And that's all."

"O.K.," Ruth Ann promised, "but then I'll show you something that'll make your eyes pop out."

The crowds were thinner during the daytime. After the curtain closed behind them and Ruth Ann's eyes adjusted to the light, she saw they were

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alone except for Professor Smitt high in his seat along the wall. The van was so quiet she heard the low humming of the air conditioner overhead.

'Come in, come in, my dears," the professor's kind voice welcomed. "Walk carefully and do not put your hands across the wall. What you are about to see has no equal anywhere on this earth."

If the professor remembered her, he gave no indication. Eagerly Ruth Ann stepped up on the riser and boosted Donna so she could see.

"Ohhh," Donna said, immediately won. "It's dolls — a whole doll town!"

Finally Ruth Ann could move slowly, drinking in beauty and enchantment in wonderful draughts. The fishing boy, the gurgling water, trees and flowers. She peeped into windows, saw ladies in long white aprons baking bread in tiny stoves, rocking babies, saw children playing with old-fashioned toys. The girl in the ruffled dress swung endlessly in her front porch swing — her hair was long and golden. Ruth Ann stared at her until her eyes watered. So real — she imagined she could see the girl breathe, see her eyes blink — it *was* amazing, just like Professor Smitt's sign said.

Halfway through their passage around the table, someone entered the van. Ruth Ann recognized Mr. Keller, the high school science teacher. He was alone and, as he reached the area under Professor Smitt's perch, she heard them begin a quiet conversation. She listened with one ear as she and Donna made their way around the corner of the town.

"—had to see it to believe it," Mr. Keller was saying. "Everyone's talking about it. I have to hand it to you, sir. I've seen mechanization before, but this is incredible. I know those figures are on tracks, yet I can't see a sign. You're a genius."

Professor Smitt smiled proudly. "This is my dream — a miniature civilization perfect in every detail. My entire adult life has been devoted to what you see."

"The artistry's remarkable. I'd swear those figures are real. Don't suppose you'd care to divulge your secret?"

Professor Smitt chuckled. "Certainly not. Then I would not have the only one of its kind."

"I take it you're a scientist."

"In my country I was its best. Perhaps in all of Europe, the best."

"And yet you're here — doing this. Forgive me, Professor, but with your skills I would imagine you to be—"

"Ah, well," Professor Smitt said gently. "Great science is not always appreciated. You might say my country did not approve of my — experimentation."

"Look," Donna said suddenly. "Look, Ruth Ann. Why doesn't that fireman move? He's supposed to clean the truck. Come on, fireman, get to work."

Ruth Ann leaned forward. One of

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the three fireman was slumped against the truck's side, head bowed, motionless. Before she could answer, Professor Smitt looked up and half rose on his narrow platform.

"Has a fireman gotten lazy, little one? They do that sometimes, despite the best of care. Do not worry, the professor will put him back to work for you. Come, shiftless one, the little girl wants to see you perform."

The thin, flexible rod he held swept across the table. Unerringly, its tip bent to the bowed fireman and touched him, ever so lightly, on the back. Tiny blue sparks flashed briefly — a sudden burning odor drifted to Ruth Ann's nose.

The fireman twitched, jerked upright. His arm shot out to rub the truck's gleaming side. For an instant his tiny face lifted — Ruth Ann looked directly into it and her heart lurched. His eyes were wild and sick with pain.

Then it was over. His head lowered and his arm resumed its smooth polishing circles. Professor Smitt and Mr. Keller continued their conversation, and Ruth Ann almost convinced herself she didn't see the three firemen exchange surreptitious glances and one of them lay a comforting hand on the lazy fireman's arm.

Without realizing it, her eyes moved across the street, to the dignified gentleman walking his dog around the block. He was standing at the corner of the wooden walk, staring at the firemen, and once again recognition stirred in her. Where had she seen—

Suddenly she felt cold. The man's face lifted. He seemed to be staring straight up at her, this giant face hanging over the wall above him, and once again she looked into tiny eyes flooded with expression — fear. Then he turned, tipped his hat to the swinging girl and walked on, the little dog bouncing nervously at his heels.

Suddenly she was urging Donna on, and they finished the tour quickly, entering sunshine again. Ruth Ann felt weak. What had happened in there? Had she imagined it? It was crazy, and yet—

While Donna waited in line for a sno-cone, Ruth Ann gazed back at the big van's golden sides. And she remembered. Who the man with the dog reminded her of. Mr. Ryan — Cassie Ryan's father. He'd been gone for a long time, but she remembered — the sandy curly hair, the moustache. Ruth Ann sat down suddenly. He not only reminded her — the little figure inside the van was an exact replica of Cassie Ryan's father.

All afternoon she thought about it, and was an early arrival in the evening, bypassing the boisterous midway. Nothing could have surprised her more than to find Cassie Ryan draped gracefully across the bottom step of Professor Smitt's van. Cassie was alone, and she looked displeased when she saw Ruth Ann.

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"Hi," Ruth Ann said. Memories of their years of togetherness flooded her. "Have you been inside?"

Cassie looked away. "No," she said shortly.

"Want to go in — with me? It's really great, don't you think?"

The incredible green eyes settled on her. "No, I don't want to go inside. I've outgrown dolls." Ruth Ann flushed. Cassie sighed. "If you must know, I'm waiting for Kenny. He's fallen in love with that damn fire truck. Personally, I think it's boring. I think this whole town is boring. I'm so sick of it I could scream. Does that answer your question?"

Ruth Ann could think of nothing to say.

"Don't let me keep you from going in," Cassie said. "And please do."

"Cassie," Ruth Ann began miserably, "what—"

"Oh, for God's sake!" With a flounce, Cassie was up and stalking away. Ruth Ann watched her red hair blend into the midway before she went inside.

The van was half-filled with viewers. She saw Kenny Lake on the far side, bent over the firemen and their truck. With luck, he wouldn't see her. Ruth Ann took her place in line and started past the fishing boy.

Now everything was different. She watched their movements, tried to see into their faces, discover expressions in their eyes. What she saw terrified her. Didn't anyone else see? The noticeable fatigue in shoulders, occasional pauses in the tracing of monotonous paths? The man plowing his garden almost fell twice while she watched him, once going to one knee, but the tiny face jerked up toward Professor Smitt suspended from the wall and the man was up again, shoulders doggedly behind his plow.

Ruth Ann's throat dried as each scene revealed a hidden detail she hadn't seen before. Two boys building a treehouse in a backyard were hiding in the leaves, motionless — a young mother rocking in a kitchen window rained tiny tears on her sleeping baby's head.

It was horrifying. Ruth Ann sent Professor Smitt a stealthy look, but he was gazing raptly over his creation as the viewers murmured in appreciation below him, his kindly face wearing a benign smile.

Directly in front of Ruth Ann, a member of some chatting ladies slumped suddenly as though she were going to faint. With dread, Ruth Ann watched the rod swoop through the air and blue sparks fizz. The woman straightened suddenly, chatting desperately.

Ruth Ann saw her eyes.

As the man walking his dog lifted his hat to the girl in the swing, suddenly his head turned. And lifted. Ruth Ann looked into Mr. Ryan's miniature face and saw recognition there. His lips moved — tiny lips — she leaned dangerously over the wall to see. The same

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silent movements — repeated again and again — help me, help me, help me.

Ruth Ann walked home in a daze. Cassie Ryan was sitting on her front steps. She rose quickly, but Ruth Ann was on her before she could get inside.

"Cassie, I have to talk to you."

"Some other time."

"Please. This is important." Suddenly Ruth Ann realized something was missing. "Where's Kenny? Why aren't you still at the carnival?"

Cassie's lip curled. "That's none of your business, is it? We had a fight, O.K.? Now, will you please go away and leave me alone?"

Stubbornly, Ruth Ann held her ground. While Cassie sighed and tapped her foot, Ruth Ann told her what she'd seen and the unbelievable suspicions she had, saving the man and his dog to the very end.

"Didn't you notice, Cassie? That man looks exactly like your father. It's him, I know it, and I don't know what to do about it."

Cassie was still for a very long time. Ruth Ann waited for her to say what they would do.

"You're really weird, you know that?" Cassie said finally. "Everybody says so. And I think it's rotten for you to say something like that to me. You know my father ran away with another woman. You stink, Ruth Ann!"

"Maybe he didn't. Anyhow, somehow Professor Smitt got hold of him. All of them, Cassie. Go back and look. They're real! I don't know how he did it, but—"

"Get away from me. You make me sick. Don't you ever dare to speak to me again!"

She was gone. Ruth Ann had no choice but to go home and lie awake in her room, seeing over and over again Mr. Ryan's lips move — help me, help me, help me.

The next day Ruth Ann's parents had company, and Professor Smitt's town performed without her. But she watched it in her mind, the tiny people moving about their lovely, perfect little town. Cassie had to help her — there was no one else she could tell.

On the following evening, she searched for Cassie and found her, surrounded by a group of older girls, chosen ones, laughing and squealing together in exaggerated glee. Cassie's hair shone like fire. She wore tight jeans and a low, daring top — her eyes met Ruth Ann's and deliberately slid away. Ruth Ann set her jaw and marched toward the group's closed fringe.

"Can I talk to you a minute, Cassie, please?"

Cassie's eyes turned icy. "Are you talking to me?"

"Honest, it's important."

The other girls murmured and exchanged grins. With head high, Cassie left them and drew Ruth Ann aside, fingers biting painfully into her arm.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

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"You're coming with me," Ruth Ann insisted. "Right now. To Professor Smitt's town. If you don't, I'll follow you all over this carnival — tonight, tomorrow, the whole time it's here. I'll embarrass you in front of your new friends, Cassie, tell them secrets, things you told me, I swear. I need your help. I have to prove to you that little man is your father. Now, are you going to come?"

Cassie's eyes were frightening. She whispered, "I'll get you for this, Ruth Ann, I promise, I'll get you. You wait right here."

Ruth Ann watched her rejoin the girls, saw their whispered conversation, the amused stares they sent her way. She felt sick inside, but she stayed, and when Cassie returned, she tried to pretend it was the way it used to be as they walked together through the dark.

Cassie didn't speak on the way to the golden van, nor did she utter a sound as she moved arrogantly through the line of people inside. Again her hair seemed to light up the van's interior — Ruth Ann saw Professor Smitt's eyes follow her. When they reached the little man walking his dog, she held up the line as long as possible, waiting for Cassie to see, to recognize her father.

But when she looked at Cassie's tight lips, the glittering eyes, she knew Cassie was seeing nothing but her fury, and she followed her helplessly from the van.

Cassie's friends were waiting close by the van's steps. While Ruth Ann hesitated, eyeing them, Cassie stopped at the foot and turned back to face her, blocking her way, holding her prisoner on the steps. Ruth Ann held out her hand.

"Cassie," she whispered, "I was only trying to help — you — and your father."

"Ruth Ann," Cassie said, voice loud and clear, "Ruth Ann — ratface — I don't associate with creeps. Leave me alone, O.K.? You're such a pitiful dreg. Nobody really likes a dreg, you know?"

Clinging to the railing, Ruth Ann watched them walk away. She heard their snickers and the chorus of, "Dreg! Oh, that's perfect, Cassie — pitiful dreg!" It was some time before she could creep down the steps and hide in the deep shadows behind one of the van's huge tires.

The midway emptied, the last tired stragglers deserting the carnival, and still she huddled, stiff and unmoving. They'd pass it all over school — she'd never be able to face anyone again.

Suddenly a man appeared through shadows and started up Professor Smitt's steps. Mr. Libertini — Ruth Ann recognized him from the triumphant parade into town.

His visit was short. She heard loud voices, a silence, then Libertini descended the steps and moved woodenly away — but not before Ruth Ann caught a glimpse of his face. It was

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white, and his eyes — his eyes were the eyes of the little people inside.

Slowly Ruth Ann crawled from behind the tire. The small light still burned over the door. The door—

The door was ajar.

Halfway up the steps, she heard Professor Smitt's voice. Talking, yet everyone was gone. Even the pimply boy — Ruth Ann had seen him leave.

The voice murmured, rose, became a shout. Thudding movement inside. Ruth Ann was in the van, eyes at the slit in the curtain in time to see the professor round the far corner of the town. He was smiling, a flash of teeth through his beard; he lunged at a section of the wall. Ruth Ann saw a tiny blur of white — something moving up the inside wall, clawing for the top. Then the professor's hand closed over it and he threw it with all his strength against the van's side. She heard the tiny breaking sounds and watched white ruffles slide slowly to the floor. Professor Smitt stooped to pick it up — it lay, limp and motionless across his palm. He turned, holding it high above the table. He smiled.

"Don't think I don't know what you're doing," he said in his soft warm voice. "Let this be a lesson. Believe me, children, there is no way out."

Gasping, fist clenched against her mouth, Ruth Ann backed away. She half fell down the steps and ran — through the ghostly midway, through the sleeping town. Ran until her breath was gone and a painful stitch developed in her side. She sat on her front porch until she could breathe again, and all the while her mind was spinning — click click click.

Libertini's Extravaganza opened at noon, and Ruth Ann was there. She was the first inside the golden van, and she moved surely around the table. Professor Smitt smiled down at her, showing no recognition. The firemen polished their truck, the man who looked like Mr. Ryan walked his dog, and the porch swing—

The porch swing was empty.

"Professor," Ruth Ann ventured, "what happened to the girl in the long white dress?"

Professor Smitt sighed. "Ah, a malfunction, my child. She will soon be fixed, I guarantee. So, you've seen my little town?"

"Oh yes," Ruth Ann said. "I was here once before. The people — the people look so real. I came back because my friend, Cassie Ryan, is telling everyone they *are* real. Maybe you remember Cassie — a very pretty girl my age with red hair and green eyes. Well, she said she sneaked into your van last night and — she won't say what she saw, but she says somehow you managed to shrink real people down." Professor Smitt sat silent and still. "She's telling simply *everyone*," Ruth Ann repeated.

"And you, child, do you believe they're real?" Professor Smitt asked softly.

Ruth Ann smiled. "Well," she said,

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"they're pretty good, I guess. Almost real. But no, I can tell they're fake."

Two days later Cassie Ryan ran away from home. Libertini's Extravaganza moved on, and now only one topic of conversation dominated the town.

"Poor Sally Ryan," Ruth Ann's mother said. "First Michael and now Cassie. It just seems such a shame."

"Well, Cassie said she was bored," Ruth Ann said. "She told me that one night when the carnival was here. She said this town was so boring she could scream."

Ruth Ann was fourteen and filling out in some of the places she was supposed to the next summer when she was allowed to travel across state to visit an aunt and uncle for a week. Her heart almost stopped when she saw a carnival in town — Libertini's Extravaganza.

The sky was black, music and lights creating magic when Ruth Ann paused for a moment at the foot of the steps of the golden van.

PROFESSOR SMITT'S AMAZING TINY TOWN.

He was there, in his seat along the wall, as Ruth Ann took her place in line. It was as she remembered it, every inch carved into memory: the fishing boy, the garden plower, the firemen, the dignified man walking his dog. He tipped his hat, and heart pounding, Ruth Ann nudged the woman beside her.

"Look, that one's not moving."

"So it isn't," the woman said. "Professor, there's something wrong with this one."

Instantly the flexible rod snaked through the air. "Ah, a lazy one, I see. Come, come, my dear, these good people came to see you perform. Shame on you. Back to work now."

The blue sparks hissed, and the girl in the porch swing twitched and sent the swing into a frenzy of motion. The white parasol twirled jerkily over her shoulder.

Ruth Ann leaned both elbows on the wall and looked down at soft red hair and terrified green eyes.

"Yes, my dear," she said softly. "We paid good money to see this show. Don't be such a pitiful dreg. Nobody really likes a dreg, you know?"

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Ron Goulart's new story is a consumer affairs caper, in which an agent for Product Investigation Enterprises goes after a hijacked shipment of bizarre breakfast food. Mr. Goulart's latest novel is THE MAGIC TIGER, coming in October from Timescape.

Brain Food

BY

RON GOULART

While I wouldn't go so far as to say I handled this latest assignment in an absolutely brilliant fashion, sir, I really can't agree with you that I behaved like a whey-faced simp.

Seems to me you still haven't completely adjusted to your unfortunate accident. You ought to be able to understand that the world at large doesn't judge people by gorilla standards and that, as a result of having your brain end up in an unsightly gorilla body because of that teleport mishap a few years back, you have to make an extra effort to view things in a less gorilla-like manner. I never claimed to be a pretty boy, as you accused when I attempted to pixphone in my report on the Brainola matter. Nor have I consciously behaved, again in your phrase, like a smartass.

I've always been a dedicated agent for Product Investigation Enterprises, happy to serve my country and protect the consumer against dangerous products and practices. Also, sir, I want to point out at the start of this toktyped report that I'm not, as you hinted while you were hopping and bellowing around your DC-2 office back there in the nation's capital and flinging those banana peels at the phone screen, shacked up in tamale-land with a knock-kneed floozie. It's surprising to me to find you so prejudiced against the ethnic and gender groups. Most gorillas, from what I've read, are quite liberal. Give them a tree to climb, a banana to ... but you're probably thumping your chest in impatience by now. Let me, therefore, get on with this assignment report.

I hope, by the way, you won't be unsettled by my submitting a faxcopy of this report to the Pulitzer Committee so that they can consider it for a

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Best Consumer Advocacy Award for the year 2020.

My arrival in Greater Los Angeles on the evening of 20 September 2020 was delayed nearly an hour because our robot pilot turned out to have an allergy to smog. Every time he started to set down at the Disneyland Field he sneezed, and up we went again. Usually I teleport from Washington out to the coast, but as I was about to step on a platform in DC-2 I noticed a fat lady with a chimpanzee was already waiting to be whisked westward.

There was a further delay after I skycabbed to the Greater Los Angeles Rassledome. When I pushed into Madam Fatal's dressing room deep down under the arena, I found her flat on her back on a floating plaz cot and out cold.

"A plucky dame," observed a battered copper ringbot, who was massaging one of her thick wrists.

"Why's she unconscious?"

"You ever have Siamese twins step on your head?"

"Only once, while investigating a defective—"

"I advised madam not to go against the Kutsuu Sisters," the crouching robot said to me. "They're 690 pounds of dynamite, joined at the hip. You pin one, the other one fouls you. Much like that snake in the Hercules lege—"

"She didn't, then, win her freefall wrestling match tonight?"

"Would she be sprawled on her keister if she had?"

I circled her cot, glancing around the small underground room. One wall was given over to a television screen, and the activities in the wrestling pit above us showed large and distinct. A broad golden-haired woman was waving at the large enthusiastic audience before stepping into the zero-gravity tank at the center of the arena. She wore an immense golden belt around her ample waist.

"Who's the other woman, the masked one?" I inquired.

"Calls herself Baroness Blitz, hails from Bavaria."

"She's quite slender for a freefall wrestler." I eased nearer the wall images. "There's something vaguely familiar about—"

"We interrupt this sportscast to bring you an important bulletin," said the smiling blond android whose handsome image replaced the arena doings. "The Missing Persons Squad of the GLA Police has just confirmed that Sonny Funt, Jr., lovable multimillionaire star of Wallvid's top-rated show, *'Li'l Angel,'* is missing. Police, in an effort to find some clue as to the whereabouts of the diminutive tycoon, began a roundup of all known kidnappers and child molesters in the GLA area. That has, thus far, produced such a glut of suspects that—"

"Oy! Four big brogans smack in the kisser," groaned Madam Fatal. She sat up, yawned and then blushed. "Ah, well, hello there handsome."

The robot said, "You never called

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me handsome before, Mad—"

"Not you, schlepp. Him. Hello, Dan."

I shook hands with her. "Is your career slipping?"

"Naw," she assured me, swinging off the floating cot and taking a couple of wobbly steps in my direction. "It's merely that I get unsettled, off my stride as it were, when competing against deviates."

, "You mean the Kutsuu Sisters are—"

"Only one of them." Madame Fatal adjusted her one-piece sportsuit, then slapped at her immense thighs with her palms. "Now, cutie pie, let me fill you in on what I've unearthed for you in my other capacity as a free-lance consumer affairs spy."

"You informed my boss that—"

"Has he ever thought about a career in wrestling, by the way? With those shoulders—"

"He doesn't have the temperament for it. Besides which, his notions of fair play and sportsmanship are somewhat faulty."

"Why not park your carcass while we chat. Slappsy, get Agent Tockson a stool."

"That's O.K. I prefer to stand. It's better for the..."

Mindful, sir, of your previous criticisms of these reports, I'll cease giving, as you unfairly labeled it once while tearing up one of my best efforts in your massive paws, a tin-earred recreation of every blinking snippet of idiotic dialogue exchanged between myself and the lame-brained informants I work with. What follows, therefore, is a summary of what Madam Fatal had to report.

Two weeks ago, Eats, Inc., largest food-processing conglomerate on Earth, began testing a new enriched cereal in the Greater Los Angeles area. The carton, from which Madam Fatal had made notes without actually purchasing, listed the ingredients as wheat, oats, shugsub, neosoy, and Smartola. This latter is a trademarked name for a secret ingredient they claim can increase the IQ by as much as ten points over a protracted period of use.

As you know, the None of Your Damn Business Act of 2011 allows outfits like Eats, Inc. to remain silent as to what secret ingredients such as Smartola actually are. Within three days of the introduction of Brainola into select markets in GLA, Madam Fatal began to hear rumors of strange reactions and side effects. Eats, Inc. heard of this as well — which is why all hospital and police reports of hallucinations, out-of-body experiences and, in at least one instance, a violent attack of precognition among users of the new supposedly mind-enhancing cereal disappeared. So did many of the customers who'd allegedly had strange and bizarre experiences after taking in as little as one mouthful of Brainola. Families and friends of suspected victims were sullen and silent.

"We'll need a package of the stuff

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to test," I told Madam Fatal when she'd filled me in thus far.

"Don't you think I thought of that, gorgeous? Jeez, there's not a box of the stuff to be had from the placid Pacific shores to the lofty peaks of the San Berdoo Mountains."

"Sold out?"

She shook her massive head, frowns forming amidst the bootprints on her tanned skin. "The gunk's been removed, every blessed box."

"Then I'll have to find out where Eats, Inc. is storing the stuff. They probably haven't had time to dest—"

"It may not be Eats, Inc."

"Who else?"

"There are some tricky angles to this caper, dreampuss."

"Madam Fatal, I wish you wouldn't use words like that."

She reached out to stroke my cheek with a leathery hand. "You sure look like a dreampuss to me, Agent Tockson."

"The word I was complaining about is *caper*. It smacks of melodrama and—"

"Holy jeeps!" exclaimed the ringbot suddenly, clutching off his checkered cap and pressing it to his dented chest. "Look at that, will ya!"

Over on the TVwall we saw the blonde champ floating some fifty feet above the zero-G tank. She was flapping her meaty arms and legs, as though swimming against a strong current. While we watched, her glittering real-gold championship belt slowly unfastened itself from around her middle.

For several seconds the belt floated in the air up near the arena's plaz-ribbed, humped ceiling and then, with a small popping sound it vanished.

An instant later the champ went plummeting down toward the wrestling tank. She disappeared just shy of hittting its double-strength plaz lid, materializing inside the tank.

The masked Baroness Blitz was still freefloating inside the tank, and her entire slender and black-clad body suggested bafflement.

"You don't see something like that every night," observed the robot, tugging his cap back onto his bald head.

"Another of those Phantom Telek crimes," said Madam Fatal, nodding. "Been a good dozen so far."

"Oh, so? When'd they commence?"

"Something like two weeks ago."

"Before or after Brainola went on sale?"

"After, I think. Why?"

I didn't answer. Instead I stood watching them extracting the lady wrestlers from the tank, trying to figure out whom the masked baroness reminded me of.

After taking a sip of my herb tea — from a brandy snifter, since the decor of my suite at the Movieland Memories Skytel didn't allow for any cups — I returned my attention to the plaz-covered folder of material Madam Fatal had provided me with. A copy of a sup-

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pressed police report about a Mrs. Rosalee Plaut of the Laguna Sector especially interested me. Mrs. Plaut had been rushed into an emergency ward wrapped in the plazcloth her anxious husband had tossed over her to pacify her. She'd been breakfasting, alone, in the sunlit mealpod of her domehome when she saw several of her prize saltsub shakers start dancing on the shelves of the glaz cabinet across the room. Her breakfast fare was a bowl of Brainola.

I pushed back from the café table I was using as a desk. "Suppose they were really dancing?" I asked myself. "Suppose..."

Lifting my mint green attaché case off the floor, I set it atop the upright piano and opened it.

"Wow, some layout," remarked the voice grid of my portable computer terminal after its visual scanner had given my room a once-over. "Classy."

"What I want to know—"

"How come the piano? You can't carry a tune in a bowl."

"That's the theme décor. This is the Casablanca Suite, having something to do with a last-century motion—"

"Very fancy whatever, quite a comeup from the days when you were a soup slurper in the Nutritional Fraud Division of PIE. Shows what apple polish—"

"Every time we travel by air your Civility Tubes go awry." I slammed the heel of my hand against the case several times.

"Hey, watch the roughhousing. Else ... um.... Goodness, sir, have I been rude?"

"Don't let it worry you," I told the terminal. "What I want to do is tap the GLA Police computers for information on these Phantom Telek crimes."

The terminal made a metallic throat-clearing sort of noise. "Would you shut my lid? I hate, sir, being watched while I do anything this shady."

I obliged, strolling back to my café table. I was reaching for the folder when a gong sounded.

"Yikes! Are they wise already?" exclaimed my terminal in a muffled voice.

"That's only the door chimes." I crossed into the reception hall, activated a toggle so that the suite door became a one-way window.

Standing out on my threshold was a slender blonde young woman in a very fetcing two-piece off-white medsuit. I'm aware, sir, that you, in your present sorry state, aren't much interested in willowy girls with smooth honey-hued skin. On top of which, you persist in considering Kassy Gulliver of the Anticonsumer Agency a ruthless enemy. I, on the other hand, see her as an attractive and highly intelligent woman who happens to be temporily nasty, due mostly to a diet much too loaded with the worst kinds of junk food.

As a matter of fact, she was poised on my doorstep daintily munching on

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an ugly Sewdochoc Coconut Sweetie-bar.

"Do you know what that garbage is doing to your nervous system?" I asked, cordially, as I programmed the door to allow her in.

I envision you, sir, as you read this, snarling and muttering that I behaved as a sap. However, I ... well, we differ on field tactics.

"I won't kiss you, Dan, since there's chocolate on my breath." She smiled and gracefully wiped a large crumb of candy from one of her faint but provocative dimples.

"I can't be seduced off this one," I warned. "And why are you dressed as a nurse?"

"In case I have to stun-gun you," she explained as she walked, in that lovely way of hers, into the main room of my suite. "A young woman hefting a full-grown man over her shoulder through a hotel lobby causes some suspicion, even here in CalSouth. A nurse conveying a dopey patient, however, nobody gives a second thought to. How much did Madam Fatal tell you?"

"Aha!" I snapped my fingers. "It was you disguised as Baroness Blitz at the arena earlier this evening. You could've, you know, been seriously injured trying to spy on me that—"

"Nertz!" she rejoined. "I'm supple. I could have taken that bimbo with ease. The commotion stopped the bout before—"

"That wasn't your work, lifting her up and swiping the gold belt?"

"I'm not a telek thief." She seated herself at the upright piano, asked my computer terminal, "How've you been?"

"Can't complain," he replied in his muffled way. "Although I picked up a—"

"Back to work," I suggested. "I must assure you, Kassy, that I'm committed to this Brainola caper ... matter. You can't bribe, woo or threaten me off. You know full well what's been happening to the poor dim-witted consumers, lured by provocative advertising that promises ridiculous jumps in intelligence, who've been gobbling up this swill you and your client, Eats, Inc., have been—"

"Suppose we collaborate on this one, Dan?"

I halted in the pacing I'd been doing, stood scrutinizing her pretty face. "We're sworn adversaries, you and I. One of us represents goodness and integrity, while the other—"

"No, I'm serious," Kassy interrupted. "Some very odd things are happening."

"They certainly are." I scooped the folder off the table. "Once again a slipshod manufacturer has allowed an inadequately tested product to be put on the market." Flipping open the folder, I prodded the various reports Madam Fatal had glommed from various secret files. "Your people have probably underestimated the seriousness of what's been unleashed here in GLA. So have the loutish police."

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"What we have going on is not simple additive and synthetic-ingedient-induced hallucinations and illnesses, Kassy. Ah, no, there is something in Brainola, no doubt in this Smartola ingredient your Eats, Inc. bosses are being so shifty about, something that is releasing latent psionic powers in a certain, let us hope small, percentage of the gullible public. Nay, let us label them what they are: guinea pigs sacrificed on the altar of—"

"You're the only man I currently know who can use words like *ah* and *nay* seriously." She folded her arms under her moderate but appealing breasts. "Dan, this is the absolute truth. Somebody's highjacking all the Brainola."

"Sure, the minions of Eats, Inc."

"Nope." Her glittering blonde hair brushed at her white-clad shoulders when she gave a few negative shakes of her head. "I'll admit we've been attempting, once the word of these slightly negative—"

"Slightly negative? A man out in the Woodland Hills Sector caused his entire ranchdome to jump seven and a half feet to the—"

"But, Dan, the important thing is somebody is beating us to the Brainola." She looked directly up at me with her impressive gray-green eyes. "At least 426 cases of Brainola, each holding a dozen econosize boxes of the cereal are...." She opened her hands wide. "...gone."

I pulled over a chair and sat near her. "Why?"

"We have no idea," she said. "You PIE people haven't been confiscating it, have you?"

"No, we haven't," I assured her. "I don't have even a single box."

Kassy reached out, placed a smooth, warm hand on mine. "The Anticonsumer Agency, Dan, despite its name, does have the public's best interest in mind. I'd like you to ... well, cooperate with me on this one. Though we've usually been on opposite sides of the fence, I know you for a brilliant field investigator, a man with an amazing knack for getting to the heart of the matter."

"You're right there," I agreed. "How, exactly, do we collaborate?"

"We've located, out in the Glendale Sector, a market with two cases of Brainola in its stock room," she informed me. "Would you be willing to help stake out the place? When the highjackers arrive — which they're bound to do before long — we'll be on the spot."

I knuckled my chin, thoughtful. "You aren't trying to con me?"

She drew a cross over her left breast. "I'm not, no."

"Very well," I said, "let's go to Glendale."

I said, "I'm disappointed, Kassy."

She gave me an embarrassed smile. "Most of what I told you was true," she said. "Someone has highjacked just about all the test-market Brainola

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Even the batch that was here."

I was seated on a large neowood crate with FAKANAS ... BETTER THAN BANANAS! stenciled on its sides. "But the part about our working together in harmony was a total lie."

She glanced down at her trim off-white boots. "Afraid so, yes."

"You merely wanted me out of the way, and so you lured me to this market, a place with the dopey name Momnpop Giant Superette, that I might be stunned and diverted from my job." I shook my head forlornly. "You could've stunned me in my suite and carried me across the lobby, saving us both a good deal of time and trouble."

"I decided this would be easier." Her stun gun quivered very slightly in her right hand. "I was initially, though, planning only to truss you up and not stun you. Then you went and recognized Cush here and—"

"Who wouldn't recognize him?" I nodded at the large, usually bald man in the ill-fitting one-piece clerksuit. "How'd you expect to make me think he was the manager of this dippy place? Why, that wig of his is the silliest-looking fake I've—"

"I designed it myself," said Cushman ffool, who was, as I well knew, chief food developer for Eats, Inc.

"Wigs aren't your forte," I reminded him. "Fake food is. I take it you're the father of Brainola?"

"Sure, Brainola is my baby," acknowledged ffool. "Which is why I zipped out here from our central plant in Heartland-2 soon as I realized there must be some little snag in—"

"You put something in Brainola that triggers latent psi powers in the brain," I told him scornfully. "Didn't you even have the sense to pretest the—"

"There isn't any reliable test for that," the scientist told me, tugging angrily at his blond locks. "Don't talk to me as though I were a lout, Tockson. I'll have you know I graduated, with honors, from the Betty Crocker Institute of Technology. I was Class Valedictorian and Class Donut Maker, in fact. I mean to say, if there were some surefire test to determine if Brainola is going to cause a handful of its consumers to start lifting their houses off the foundation or predicting the winners of the Kentucky-2 Derby or—"

"You're getting all pinkish again, Cush," cautioned Kassy. "Calm down."

"I've got three diplomas," he said in my direction. "I was a Julia Child Fellow at the Chef Boy-ar-dee Academy of Advanced Synth—"

"Let me stun him now, Cush," put in the lovely Kassy. "See, Dan, I was hoping that once I got you here on neutral ground I'd be able to persuade you to—"

"You ought to know by now I don't stray from my duty." I looked her square in the eye. "If you would actually cooperate, we could find out who's been taking ffool's swill and—"

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"Nope, I'm afraid ... Yikes!" She spun all at once, stun gun pointing at the spot where Cushman ffool had been standing.

After making a pinging, popping sound, the food technician had vanished.

"Oh, Dan, what in the heck can—"

Kassy was turning her puzzled face toward me when she, too, gave off those unsettling sounds and faded from the place.

I found myself entirely alone in the dim storeroom of the Momnpop Giant Superette.

I'll gloss over all the ingenious but futile things I did over the next twelve hours, sir, knowing that too much display of my cleverness annoys you. I don't want to provoke you into breaking yet another desk the way I did with my Penny Jupiter report.

Let me, therefore, resume my narrative at the point in time of midday the following day. I was riding in the passenger seat of an armored landvan with a fellow calling himself Cowpoke Zaboly, and we were heading for an unsavory sector of Greater Los Angeles known as Perfectly Safe Pasadena. Zaboly was a thickset man in his early forties, decked out in a silver-plated sombrero and a two-piece West-style glittersuit. He was rather apelike ... make that *bull-like*, sir. At any rate, he managed seven supermarkets in the Junk Food Galore! chain. He'd approached me that morning at my suite in the Movieland, offering to sell me information.

"Seein' as how I might get my butt in a sling if I was to go to the little feller's folks," Cowpoke had explained. "Since this here caper sorta involves PIE, leastwise so Madam F leads me to believe, I figger as how it'll be lots safer dealin' with you, pard."

"Should you know anything about the possible abduction of Sonny Funt, Jr., the multimillionaire star of 'Lil Angel' and chairman of the board of Angelic Vidproductions, you must—"

"All this here jawin' ain't gettin' us nowhere, laddie. I ain't sayin' I knows anythin' or not about what happened to the little buckaroo. If I was to go near any of his kin, I might just get roped in as an accessory. Since this here news item I got for sale involves Brainola, too, I guess maybe you'd be interested."

I was, sir. I'll let you wait until I file my expense account to mention how much I passed over to Cowpoke Zaboly for his help. It seems that, on the day before he disappeared, the diminutive child star had been in Cowpoke's Junk Food Galore! outlet in the Malibu Sector. He'd bought out all the Brainola Cowpoke had in stock, some seventy-six boxes, and requested that they be delivered. Not to his New Bel-Air address nor to his office complex at Angelic, but to an address in one of the especially rundown neighborhoods of the Perfectly Safe Pasadena Sector.

This piece of information fit in with

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a theory I'd been kicking around and, thus, the noonday sun found me making my way into PSP. In the back seat rested my knapsack, containing my portable computer terminal and a few other items I deemed might be useful.

As you no doubt know, sir, Perfectly Safe Pasadena used to be simply the Pasadena Sector. After an unfortunate nuclear plant accident in 2009, it was rechristened in an effort to ease the minds of the residents. The refurbished name, however, did little good, and PSP gradually became an urban no-man's-land.

"Dang mewts!" muttered Cowpoke as he swerved to avoid hitting the four-armed youths who were playing kick-the-plaz in the rutted street we were traveling along.

"Poor kids," I said, "yet another example of the kind of thing consumers must—"

"Lookey there!" He was scowling at the rearview screen on the dash. "Each of 'em is givin' us the finger four times. Dang, but I surely do hate freaks. If it wasn't for the fact you was payin' me so highly I wouldn't be guidin' you through this pesthole.... Hot doggie, we is mostly there." He guided the van around a particularly rutted corner. "There is Uncle Sam's Brazil Wars Surplus Outlet. Been out of business nine, ten years. Used to be able to get a real nice inexpensive bazooka-style kilgun here, and they had a nice array of boots."

When we stopped in front of the dingy glazbrix building, I fetched my knapsack out of the rear seat and disembarked. "This is where Sonny Funt, Jr. had you deliver the Brainola?"

"That's her, yep." He remained in the seat. "Mind if I stick here in the van, Daniel? I got a dang good secsystem and I feel almost safe here."

"I won't need you inside, Cowpoke."

He coughed into his meaty fist. "If you ain't out in, say, half an hour or so, you want I should maybe pix the ... Holy Hannover!"

He had exclaimed because I'd suddenly vanished from the cracked and weedy walkway.

"...isn't all a bed of roses," the lean boy was saying. "Oh, sure, you probably think it's great fun being fantastically rich and beloved by multitudes."

"No, I imagine it would be a pain in the backside," I replied to Sonny Funt, Jr. "Weighing a child down with such responsibilities at a tender age can do considerable—"

"Darn right. See, I've been a major star since I was seven, not to mention eight. Nor did I experience nine in—"

"As I recall," I said, easing out of my knapsack, "seven, in my case at least, wasn't bad. But nine ... you didn't miss anything there, Sonny."

"Don't try anything tricky, Mr. Tockson," he warned, pointing his stun gun at me again. "But, slowly and carefully bring that backpack over to

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me. Be careful, too, and don't step on any of my plunder."

The enormous warehouse was dimly lit by an improvised setup of stolen floor lamps and lightstrip mobiles. Piled high on its gritty plaz floor were carton after carton of Brainola. There was also an array of sewdofur coats, gold jewelry, stacks of Banx chits, expensive servomechs, even a Rolls Datsun landcar.

Trussed up and sprawled near the boy's chair were Kassy Gulliver and Cushman ffool, both stoutly gagged. Kassy's lovely eyes cast me a plaintive look as I approached the runaway child star.

"I imagine this is the first fun you've had in many a year, Sonny," I said.

"Darn right, Mr. Tockson." He grinned. "Mom is alway trying new foods on me, especially ones that promise increased health and intelligence. After my first bowl of Brainola — which tastes like dirty sox, by the way — I really felt lousy. Yet I sensed something great was happening to me, so I didn't complain to our staff physician or to my mother. Instead I got off by myself in my wing of the mansion and experimented. I looked at a lamp, and all of a sudden it was in my hand. See, I teleported it. This stupid Brainola has the ability to—"

"Yes, it affects certain crucial portions of the brain, in a limited number of people," I responded. "I'd estimate, based on sketchy statistics extracted from police reports and such, that fewer than five percent of the victims of Brainola experienced any psionic manif—"

"I'm no victim," he said, laughing. "I know what I'm doing. It's really fun to sit here and swipe stuff from all over. I concentrate, and *wham!*, it's here. And making people look silly is neat, too. Did you see the wrestling matches the other—"

"I did. That was very deft, and sort of funny," I said. "I sensed in the pattern of these telek crimes the hand of a practical joker. That led me to—"

"Easy there," the child star warned me. "Don't go reaching into that sack for a gun or anything."

"Oh, I wasn't after a weapon," I assured him as I plunked the sack down at his feet. "I always carry a six-pack of Overich Chocolike Bongobars for quick energy." I managed to say that without wincing.

On the floor Kassy was frowning.

"Hey, do you like them, too? They're my favorites."

"Really?" I said, not letting on I'd done my research into his background. "What say we break for a little snack?"

"Okay, but pull them out real slow." He kept the stunner aimed at me.

"You quit home so you could indulge in your newfound psi powers?" I inquired, easing out the bunch of wretched candy bars.

"Mom would never let me be a telek."

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"Mothers can be narrow."

"Now she'll be sorry."

"And you swiped Mr. ffool for what purpose?"

"Well, see, I've found that a dose of Brainola only lasts about an hour," the lean boy answered. "Once I holed up here I started ordering all the Brainola I could get. Then, when I discovered Eats, Inc, was recalling the stuff, I started using my telek powers to hijack it by the case. I've got it all here now, just about." He laughed again. "I heard on the news that Cushman ffool was in GLA, and I decided to grab him. I'm going to persuade him to make me up a lot of long-lasting Brainola."

I activated the package-opening tab on the candy bars. "And why Agent Gulliver?"

"She's a crackerjack operative. I've heard of her," replied Sonny, eyes on the candy bars that were emerging from the packet to pile up on my palm. "She'd have come hunting for Mr. ffool, so I teleported her, too, so she wouldn't do that."

"Here." I passed him a Bongobar.

"Could I have, please, two?"

"They're not very good for you in such quantit—"

"I'm running things, now, Mr. Tockson. Hand it over."

"Very well." I passed him a second bar.

After resting his stun gun up under his arm, Sonny unzipped one of the bars and quickly gobbled it up. "Hey, you're not eating. Go ahead."

Slowly, I undid mine. "Sometimes, Sonny, I have assignments that don't especially please me," I said, watching him as he ate the second Bongobar.

"Quit, then, like I did," he advised. "Run away, and then you can do whatever the heck you ... Oh, darn.... You doublecrossed...." The boy went lax, the stun gun slid free of his fingers and fell to the flooring. His eyes drifted shut, he went slumping back into sleep.

I took a deep breath before setting about freeing Kassy Gulliver and the inventor of Brainola.

As to why I happen to be in a villa in Borderland-3, sir, with Agent Gulliver.

It isn't the smutty situation you imagine. The fact of the matter is that after I returned poor Sonny to his grateful parents and sent the cases of Brainola on to our crack test labs in DC-2, I felt somewhat depressed.

I did my duty, so that can't be the cause of my feeling low. Perhaps it's only a reaction to the junk food I've come in contact with during the course of this investigation. At any rate, I'm sure a week of rest and exercise beneath the tropic sun will put my mind and body back in tiptop shape.

Kassy agrees.

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Gene DeWeese, whose novels have been published by Doubleday, Ballantine and others, offers an SF tale about first contact with the Ellrohn, who were so advanced they made humans seem like backward savages — except for one unexpected talent.

Feat of Clay

BY
GENE DEWEESE

The first indication of what came to be known as the Ellrohn Ship was the discovery of a new X-ray source in Boötes, at approximately 35° north declination and 15^h right ascension. For a brief moment, the discoverer thought that a new pulsar had appeared, but she soon realized she was faced with something far more bizarre.

The radiation was continuous, not pulsed.

Even when first detected, it was several orders of magnitude brighter than the brightest previously known X-ray source, and it was growing stronger at an exponential rate.

Triangulation using orbital observatories showed that the source was slightly less than two hundred million kilometers distant.

And it was stationary.

Whatever was producing the X rays was within the solar system, but it was not orbiting the sun. It was literally hanging in space, high above the ecliptic, motionless with respect to the sun.

On the second day of the source's existence, most of Earth was blanketed with the brightest auroras in history, and all radio and television broadcasts were hopelessly jammed by static. And the radiation, which was now beginning to spread up and down the spectrum from its starting point at 10 angstroms, showed no signs of peaking or even leveling off. If it continued increasing at the same rate, it would reach dangerous levels within forty-eight hours and fatal levels not long after.

But then, as the third day began, the source vanished. One microsecond it was there, growing at a frightening pace, the radiation just beginning to reach the visible portion of the spectrum, and the next microsecond it was

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gone, vanished as if it had never existed.

Some hours later, when the auroras faded and communications gradually returned to normal, it was discovered that, approximately eleven minutes before the source vanished, a gravity wave of unprecedented magnitude had been detected. For the first time since the experimental detecting devices had been set up more than half a century before, each and every one simultaneously registered an event that stood out like Everest against the background noise. New shivers coursed through upper-echelon spines when someone pointed out that the events had been detected precisely 10.97 minutes prior to the disappearance of the source. And that the source had been 10.97 light-minutes from Earth.

Twenty-four hours after the source vanished, the Ellrohn Ship, almost a quarter of a mile in diameter, was first detected. It was fifty million kilometers distant, directly on a line between the now-vanished radiation source and Earth. It was moving directly toward Earth at roughly two thousand kilometers per second.

Twelve hours after it was first detected, the Ellrohn Ship settled into a synchronous orbit above the Atlantic Ocean. As far as could be seen from any of the orbital observatories, it was a totally featureless white sphere. Radar indicated nothing except that the surface of the sphere reflected one hundred percent of the energy directed at it.

Two manned flights attempted to approach the Ship, but the controls froze, sending both into circular orbits several thousand kilometers below their goal. The controls of a robot probe had not had time to freeze when the probe itself vanished in a flash of soundless light ten thousand kilometers from the Ship.

Forty-eight hours after it entered Earth orbit, the Ellrohn Ship spoke to Earth. Or, more specifically, it spoke to everyone who, for the past two days, had been trying to speak to *it*, which included several million CB operators and the governments of two-thirds of the countries of the world.

From all radios which were trying to contact the Ship, regardless of the frequency on which they were operating, a rumbling bass voice said:

"We are the Ellrohn. You have no need to fear us, for we come in peace to welcome you of Earth into the Ellrohn family of worlds." There was a brief pause, and then the voice continued, its tone indicating the use of capital letters: "The Ellrohn Family of Worlds, which currently numbers in excess of five thousand."

There was another pause, and to those who listened closely there seemed to be a faint sound of breathing. After nearly a minute of silence, the voice resumed, but only for a single sentence:

"We will contact you again in forty-eight of your hours, after you have had ample time to discuss the sig-

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nificance of our arrival."

Then there was silence.

Simultaneously, in millions of receivers around the world, the voice and the carrier frequency vanished, and no amount of shouting or pleading into the millions of microphones brought even a hint that anyone was listening.

Within minutes, when the millions stopped trying to recontact the Ellrohn and began talking to each other, it became apparent that not only had the voice been received simultaneously on hundreds of different frequencies but it had spoken simultaneously and without accent in hundreds of different languages.

For the next forty-eight hours, there were few conversations, particularly among government officials and scientists, that did not center on the Ellrohn and the thousands of questions their arrival and their announcement had raised.

Where were they from?

Did they truly "come in peace" as they claimed?

Was their invitation to join the "Ellrohn Family of Worlds" a genuine invitation or a thinly veiled threat?

Was their melodramatic method of communication simply the way they did things? Or was it a not-so-subtle hint that their science — and hence their power — was so far beyond Earth's that declining their invitation — or resisting their invasion — would be both foolish and futile?

Had the radiation and the subsequent burst of gravitational energy been merely a by-product of their method of travel? Or another demonstration of their capabilities? Either way, it was frightening. If the radiation source had appeared where the Ellrohn Ship now orbited rather than two hundred million kilometers distant, all life on Earth's surface would have been destroyed.

After precisely forty-eight hours of silence, the millions of receivers crackled into life again, and again the multitongued voice spoke. Millions of other receivers, which had not been in operation during the first contact, remained stubbornly silent.

"We are the Ellrohn," the voice began, and for an unnerving instant, the thought darted through millions of minds that the Ship might be only a mindless robot, programmed to play the same message over and over. But after a brief pause, the voice continued:

"You have had two of your days to consider the meaning of our arrival and our offer." Then, somehow, the voice softened. It remained deep and laden with authority, but some of the hardness and remoteness was gone.

"We would not expect you to accept or reject our offer blindly," it said. "Naturally you will wish to know fully what you can expect to receive and what you can expect to give. Therefore, all countries who so desire will assemble representatives to be taken aboard our ship. What representatives

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you select, if any, is of course up to your individual governments, but our suggestion is that you include at least one who has the authority to speak for your country as a whole, at least one who is expert in each of the major areas of science, and at least one who can report clearly and concisely to your countries what they will be shown. Have your representatives assembled at your respective capitals twenty-four hours from now."

Again the voice paused, and when it spoke again, the tone was matter-of-fact, as if adding an unimportant afterthought. "There will be no need for the protective clothing that your own limited forms of space travel require."

Then there was silence as both voice and carrier vanished. As before, nothing could break that silence.

Again there were thousands of questions and no answers. There was even some doubt as to whether or not the signals had actually come from the Ellrohn Ship. The signal strength at each receiver had seemed to be just enough to operate that receiver at its optimum level. Those receivers with directional antennae picked up the signal equally well no matter what direction they were pointed. And the hundreds of elaborate direction-finding systems that had been set up during the intervening forty-eight hours of course received no signals at all. Again, was this simply the way the Ellrohn did things? Or was it a purposeful demonstration of their abilities?

This time, however, the paramount question was whom to select to be each country's representatives. To no one's surprise, there were literally millions of volunteers in the U.S. alone, and similar numbers in most other countries. President Langdahl, displaying the same decisive one-upsmanship that had gotten him elected three years before, preempted most of the difficulties by announcing his selections within minutes of the Ellrohn broadcast. The vice president, of course; two senators; two congressmen; a dozen scientists whose names the national science advisor had been required to pull out of his computer terminal after less than ninety seconds of frantic thought; and Paul Gallagher, one of the more popular science writers who just happened to be in Washington testifying before a Senate subcommittee and one of whose books President Langdahl happened to have read only weeks before.

The eighteen were duly assembled on the White House lawn only minutes before the twenty-four hours were up, while a million or more envious spectators were held at bay by half the city police force and a contingent of marines that had been helicoptered to the White House grounds even as the president announced his selections.

Then, precisely twenty-four hours after the second Ellrohn message, a thirty-foot grayish sphere that looked like a miniature version of the Ellrohn Ship itself descended soundlessly to the lawn a few yards from the waiting

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eighteen. Identical scenes, they all knew, were taking place in hundreds of other cities around the world.

"We are the Ellrohn," the millions of radio receivers said once again, as if speaking a litany, and the thirty-foot spheres spoke as well. "Your representatives may now enter the shuttles."

As the words died away, a dark, rectangular opening appeared in each of the spheres, and a ramp of shimmering rainbows extended instantaneously to the ground.

At varying speeds, with varying degrees of reluctance and eagerness, all but a dozen of the thousands of representatives around the world entered the spheres.

The ramps and openings winked out of existence, and the spheres shot upward as swiftly and silently as shadows.

There was no sense of motion, at least not for Paul Gallagher in the U.S. shuttle. For him there was only a second, perhaps two, of mild queasiness which might have been the result of the constantly shifting, multicolored patterns that covered all of the shuttle's inner surfaces, or merely the result of his own nervousness. The others — Vice President Claydia Otterson, the senators and congressmen, the dozen or so scientists — stood silently, expressionlessly, but from the growing patches of dampness Paul could see under the arms of those who had not worn jackets, he suspected they were easily as nervous as he was himself, though he doubted that any had quite the same reasons as he.

Uneasily, his mind slid back to the bizarre prelude to his invitation.

He had been scheduled to testify before one of the Senate's science subcommittees the day before, but the Senate, like almost every other organization in Washington and around the world, had been essentially out of business since the first Ellrohn message. Instead of testifying, then, Paul had gone across town to Soralda Murchison's tiny hole-in-the-wall lab for psychic research. It was one of a dozen or so the government reluctantly supported, primarily for propaganda purposes. Whenever the Russians or Chinese hit the headlines with something new in the field, the labs could be pointed to as proof that the U.S. had its own program and was not in danger of being left hopelessly behind.

Paul had met Soralda during one of his previous testimonial trips to Washington. She was a middle-aged, no-nonsense type who was as hardheaded and pragmatic in her own way as any engineer he had ever known, and he had soon become so intrigued by her scientifically rigorous yet open-minded approach to psychic phenomena that he was seriously considering making it the subject of his next book. And on this particular afternoon, Soralda's lab was virtually the only establishment of any kind that was carrying on business

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as usual. In fact, it was almost as if the Ellrohn didn't exist for Soralda.

"One impossibility at a time, Paul," she told him as she shepherded him through the cluttered office and into the meticulously kept lab itself.

"And this is Lainey Carlisle," she went on, introducing him to a young blonde woman attached to a score of monitoring devices. "*She* is the impossibility with which I am currently involved."

The girl had been flown in from Toronto, and she was, according to Soralda, either one of the most talented psychometrists in the Western Hemisphere or one of the slickest, most laid-back con artists. On previous days, she had scored nearly one hundred percent on two of the double-blind tests Soralda herself had devised, and she had knocked a good half of the monitoring instruments for a loop as well. Localized skin temperature, alpha-wave patterns, heart rate and blood pressure — all had varied wildly throughout most of the tests despite an outward appearance of almost Buddha-like calm.

Being careful of the wires trailing from evey part of Lainey's anatomy, Paul reached out to shake the girl's hand, thinking she looked more like a fresh-scrubbed high school cheerleader than a psychic. After only the briefest of touches, however, she snatched her hand back and her face twisted in a startled grimace, as if she had been unexpectedly dowsed with a pail of icy water.

"Don't go!" she said, her voice a pained whisper. "You must not go!"

Both Paul and Soralda looked at her, startled, Soralda the more so because of the total calm the girl had exhibited previously.

"Don't go where?" Paul asked, puzzled.

But the girl only shook her head violently, threatening to knock loose the monitoring patches fastened to her forehead and scalp. "It will destroy you! You must not go!"

And that was all they were able to get out of her. Twenty minutes later, when Soralda decided to call it quits for the day because the girl was apparently too upset to perform reliably, the phone rang in the tiny, cluttered office just outside the lab.

It was the White House. The caller, a presidential aide, explained to Paul about the second Ellrohn message — which he and Soralda had missed while trying to question and calm the girl — and informed him that he was invited to be one of the U.S. representatives to the Ellrohn Ship.

The coincidence of the girl's terrified warning and the invitation jarred him, especially considering Soralda's testimony to her talent, but it of course didn't keep him from accepting. But, then, nothing short of a threat of certain death the instant he returned to Earth would have stopped him, and he wasn't sure about even that. For a science writer, particularly one who had entered the field as the result of a

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youthful addiction to science fiction, it was the plum to end all plums, the ground floor to end all ground floors. It was like being invited along as a passenger on Apollo 11.

But now, as he stood waiting silently in the Alice-in-Wonderland reality of the interior of the Ellrohn shuttle, the warning came back to him, liberally reinforced by the countless questions that had been raised about the Ellrohn's motives over the last seventy-two hours. But even now, all it bred in Paul was a thin layer of apprehension overlaying the massive, sparkling core of Christmas Eve anticipation.

But he was allowed little time for either worry or anticipation. It seemed they had barely entered the shuttle when there was a second moment of mild queasiness, and Paul looked around hastily. They couldn't possibly have covered the forty thousand kilometers to the Ellrohn Ship already — could they? That kind of acceleration would....

Shaking his head, he realized he was being both foolish and provincial. A race capable of what the Ellrohn had already demonstrated should certainly have no trouble eliminating the effects of acceleration.

Abruptly, a door opened in one of the rainbow-surfaced walls, and the queasiness was replaced by a sharp, almost painful twinge in his solar plexus. This time he knew it was simply his own nerves acting up. He had felt the same twinge, almost as intense, twenty-odd hours earlier when he had seen the door to the president's office open, and it had finally gotten through to him that the phone call and the limousine ride across town were exactly what they appeared to be and not just some elaborate joke.

Trying to keep from shaking too badly, Paul followed the others through the opening in the rainbow walls.

An instant later he gasped and almost screamed as he found himself standing on empty space. Directly below his feet was yawning blackness, punctuated by thousands of pinpoints of light. Then, as vertigo gripped him and his arms flailed for balance, a planet swam into existence below him. A brown and white ball in the middle of the stars and blackness of space. A brown and white ball that was definitely not Earth.

"Quite a show, isn't it?"

Paul recognized the vice president's soft voice, and he felt her steadying hand on his shoulder. Abruptly, as if the hand and the voice had been grains of sand dropped into a supersaturated solution, the rest of his surroundings sprang into focus.

The room — air lock? vestibule? — was in reality no larger than the shuttle, but it looked infinitely larger because of the frighteningly realistic three-dimensional images on — in? — the walls, not to mention the planetary ball beneath his feet and the cobalt blue sky overhead. On all sides stretched a

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city, all the way to the horizon and beyond, and the view seemed to be from the highest building in that city. But it was not a city out of a futuristic movie. There were no spires, no soaring, gravity-defying architecture, no glistening machines floating through the air. Instead, it was blocky and utilitarian, a sea of various-sized cubes. But every cube was, like the interior of the shuttle, a shimmering, ever-changing rainbow.

"My God," Paul heard one of the scientists murmur, "a planet-sized Lava Light," and some of the others laughed nervously.

"Holograms, it has to be!" one of the senators said, as if proud of the fact that he knew the word.

One of the jacketless scientists — Paul remembered seeing him at NASA during one of his Houston trips — shook his head stubbornly. "Too much detail. Far too much detail."

"Too much for *us*, maybe," another said, "but for them—"

Silence fell like a guillotine as a giant stepped through the wall opposite the one the group had entered.

It was humanoid. It had arms, legs, four-fingered hands, and a head with roughly human features. It stood two and a half meters tall, and it wore a loose-fitting single-piece uniform, green with gold trim on the sleeves, collar and legs. What little exposed skin there was — massive hands and a totally hairless, roughly cylindrical head — was slate gray, like smooth, baked modeling clay. The eyes were small and deeply recessed, the nose broad and flat, the mouth thin and almost lipless.

"Welcome aboard, ladies and gentlemen," it said in the same deep voice and the same flawless English that had issued from the radios. The sound, like the radio signals, seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. The giant's almost nonexistent lips moved slightly, but the motion came nowhere near to matching the English words they all heard. And the words continued to be heard for a moment after the lips ceased moving. Paul wondered if the sound was being picked up by the cassette in his shirt pocket or only by his ears.

The giant swung a hand to indicate the images in the walls, floor, and ceiling. "We thought that some views of the Ellrohn Homeworld might be of interest to you," he said, and then fell silent.

"Yes, most impressive," the vice president began, "but now, as leader of the United States delegation, I would like to introduce—"

"Quite unnecessary, Vice President Otterson," the voice said, and the giant's eyes skimmed across them all. "We are aware of your identities and functions." A pause, and then: "It is unfortunate that President Langdahl did not see fit to come."

There was silence then, except for a low whistle from one of the scientists. The giant turned toward the man, red-

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haired and freckled, in his thirties. "That sound, as we understand it, indicates astonishment on your part, or perhaps disbelief."

Then the eyes swept over everyone as the voice went on. "There is no need for astonishment, and to disbelieve would be unwise."

The tone, somehow, sounded final. Otterson and most of the scientists seemed to take the announcement in stride, but the senators and congressmen looked decidedly uncomfortable, as if, by not being formally introduced, they had been deprived of a basic right.

"You have come," the giant continued, "to learn the benefits of being allowed to join the Ellrohn Family of Worlds. Very well. To put it in the simplest terms, humans will be given access to whatever of our scientific achievements you wish — except, for the moment, the interstellar drive."

For a second, there was stunned silence, and then everyone was speaking at once.

The Ellrohn giant held up one hand in a remarkably human gesture for silence. Before silence came, he began speaking again, his voice overpowering all the others easily. "Your questions will be answered in due time. For the present, you need only watch and listen."

The giant turned then, and his hand made a short, chopping gesture in the air. The wall he had stepped through a minute before vanished.

The tour *was* effective, Paul soon had to admit, even if he did have the distinct feeling that he and the other U.S. representatives — there was no sign of the hundreds of other delegations — were being guided through a museum. A museum of incredible scientific and technological miracles, but a museum nonetheless. Still, it was impossible not to be impressed as one achievement after another was shown and demonstrated and, at least superficially, explained.

As a starter, there had been the translator, one of which was responsible for the giant's slightly delayed but faultless English. It was a disk smaller than a dime, surgically implanted in his throat. It was totally self-contained but could be instantly reprogrammed by the ship's main computer to translate from any known language to any other known language. All of Earth's languages — at least those which had, in the last few days, broadcast billions of words and pictures into space — were known. The ship's computer itself was a unit roughly one meter in diameter and was linked directly and instantaneously to hundreds of other Ships as well as the Ellrohn Homeworld. It utilized, they said, molecular storage and room temperature superconductors.

Then there was a demonstration of how any element or compound could be transformed into any other element

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or compound of equal mass. Alchemists a few centuries ago had called it transmutation and had tried to accomplish it with a philosopher's stone. The Ellrohn called it something for which there was no English equivalent, and they used a gadget about the size of a small refrigerator.

And of course there were the three-dimensional images, which, it turned out, were not holograms after all, although just what they were neither Paul nor any of the scientists quite understood.

And the power for the Ship itself and for all the gadgets, the Ellrohn giant said, was supplied by devices making use of artificially created white holes.

After almost two hours, the group emerged into the largest room they had yet been shown. It was a hundred feet long and a dozen feet wide, more of a corridor than a room. At each end stood a single circular platform about a foot high. Three meters above each platform was a disk, apparently suspended in midair. Platforms and disks were both approximately one meter in diameter.

For no reason that he could discern, Paul shivered as he looked at the devices.

The giant said nothing as he stepped onto the nearer platform. He waited a few seconds, apparently to be sure all eyes were centered on him, and then he moved one hand briefly.

He vanished, but in the same instant he reappeared on the platform at the far end of the corridor.

Simultaneously, there were a dozen gasps, and Paul felt an inexplicable chill spread over his body. There was no reason, he told himself. It was just one more piece of Ellrohn scientific wizardry, no more startling than any of the others.

And yet the chill persisted, and Lainey Carlisle's terrified face flickered repeatedly through his mind.

Briskly, the giant strode back along the corridor toward them. "Our transportation system for planetary distances," the translator disk's voice said as he approached. "It is used on all the Ellrohn Family of Worlds. Would any of you care to try it for yourself?"

Again there was an all-emcompassing chill, and Paul felt himself draw back. He glanced at the others, wondering if they were feeling the same thing.

One of the scientists, a physicist from NASA, was stepping forward hesitantly. "A matter transmitter?" he asked. His voice was unsteady, and Paul realized that the other man was having the same chill.

"Precisely," the giant said. "Unfortunately, it is limited to the speed of light, so it is impractical for interstellar distances. Still, it is most useful for moving about a planetary surface, even from point to point within a planetary system."

The physicist, a middle-aged, balding man named Reinhardt, stood look-

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ing at the space between the platform and the suspended disk. He glanced at the giant, who had come to a halt a few feet from him. "There are no ill effects?"

"None. A momentary disorientation, but that is all." The giant held his arms out from his sides, as if offering himself for inspection. "There is hardly an Ellrohn alive who has not traveled this way hundreds of times."

Reinhardt remained silent for several seconds, then pulled in a deep breath and stepped onto the platform. For an instant, the chill that had spread over Paul intensified, and it took a solid effort of will to keep from snatching at the physicist's arm and dragging him from the platform. Nervously, Paul glanced at the others, and he saw the same uneasiness in all their faces. Reinhardt himself was trembling slightly, beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

"Are you ready?" the giant asked matter-of-factly.

Reinhardt nodded stiffly.

The giant's lips moved, but this time there was no sound from the translator.

Reinhardt vanished.

And reappeared on the second platform.

For several seconds there was total silence as all eyes were focused on the physicist, waiting. Then, abruptly, everyone in the group heard the loud whoosh as Reinhardt released the breath he had obviously been holding.

Shaking his head and grinning, he jumped down from the platform, and seventeen other sighs of relief were heard.

"Well?" "What did it feel like?" "How was it?" "Are you all right?"

Everyone was talking at once as Reinhardt jogged toward them, and all fell silent as he opened his mouth.

"Nothing to it," he said, and then, shaking his head wonderingly. "I didn't feel a thing. It was as if everyone else moved, but I stayed still."

Reinhardt shook his head ruefully. "I have to admit, I was scared spitless when I got up there, but now...." He looked at the Ellrohn. "Now that I have an idea what it's like, could I try it again?" He sounded like a child who had just unwrapped a new toy on Christmas morning.

"If you wish," the giant said.

And the physicist did, laughing gleefully as he appeared on the distant platform a second time. "Go ahead," he said as he jumped down. "The rest of you try it. I don't want to hog all the fun."

And one by one, they did, each in the same way — reluctant and almost trembling as they stepped onto the transmitter platform, grinning in relief or simply laughing wonderfully as they stepped down from the receiver.

Until finally only Paul remained.

Despite it all, despite the obviously successful transfers of the other seventeen, he still hung back. Every time he made a move toward the platform, the

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chill spread over him like an icy mist.

In the end, Reinhardt took Paul's arm. "Mr. Gallagher," he said with a smile, "how can you 'describe to the people what you experience' if you do not yourself experience it?"

And Paul knew he was right. If anyone should do this, it was he. It would be, he told himself as he remembered his thoughts when he had first been notified of the invitation, like going along on Apollo 11 and then staying inside the LEM the whole time.

Pulling in his breath, he forced a smile and stepped forward.

"Don't worry," Vice President Otterson said. "I felt the same way when I stepped up. Scared spitless, as Dr. Reinhardt said, even after he and some of the others had gone through."

"I know," Paul said. "I know."

And then, feeling the same way he had the first — and only — time he had leaped out of a plane with a skydiving group, he sprang onto the platform.

A moment later, the Ellrohn spoke once again the silent words that activated the machine.

Paul Gallagher vanished.

And reappeared.

And forty thousand kilometers below, in a Washington motel, Lainey Carlisle screamed at the sudden pain that lanced through every fiber of her body.

The delegations to the Ellrohn Ship were returned to Earth the same way they had been picked up, and the following day the Ellrohn spoke once again.

"We are the Ellrohn," the millions of radio receivers began with the now familiar words. "Yesterday your representatives were shown a small sampling of what will be available to you all should you choose to join the Ellrohn Family of Worlds. In the days that follow, we of the Ellrohn will move among you in order to observe your potential in its own turn, for such is our custom on all worlds who receive our invitation. Despite our advanced science, we are open to learning and to new experiences. Hence your own science and your various approaches to research in all fields could well be of interest to us. It has been so on other worlds, and it will doubtless be so again.

"This phase will begin in each of your countries as soon as the leaders of each country agree to receive us. If any are reluctant to respond because of concern for our safety on your world, there is no need. Though I am sure there are those among you demented enough to wish us harm, there is nothing they can do to endanger us in any way."

With that assurance — or perhaps warning? — the Ellrohn once again fell silent.

The first Ellrohn began appearing in various world capitals twenty-four hours later.

Endros was tired, the way he often

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thought the entire Ellrohn race must be tired. With each new world — and this was his twentieth — his tiredness grew. He was tired of watching, even more tired of participating in, the same age-old game of impressing the natives of one backward planet after another.

And this particular phase, when he and the others made their aloof appearances among the natives, was the most tiresome and distasteful charade of all. They would look politely at the planet's most advanced science, listen to the most advanced theories and daring speculations from the brightest minds, and it would all come to nothing. In the end, the Ellrohn would reach the foregone conclusion they had reached thousands of times before.

And they would announce their verdict: Nothing of value has been discovered.

The announcement would, of course, be the final blow to the already-shattered ego of this world, as it had been to all those others. As if the mere existence of the Ellrohn and their science were not enough.

And then the benevolent Ellrohn would hasten to reassure the natives that this regrettable but not unexpected verdict would have no adverse effect on the invitation to join the Ellrohn Family of Worlds.

But what could the Ellrohn expect? What could they possibly expect to find on this or any other world at this primitive stage of development? If the worlds the Ellrohn discovered were left to their own devices, left to develop at their own pace, in their own directions for as long as the Ellrohn themselves had developed untouched, *then*, at some distant future date, there might *be* something of value to be learned.

Endros had once made his doubts known. He had even gone so far as to suggest a hands-off policy in at least some few cases, but of course his words had fallen on deaf ears. This was the way it had been done for ten thousand years and would doubtless continue to be done for another ten thousand. Or until the Ellrohn themselves were "discovered" by some distant race and relegated to that same status of "backward natives."

And it had to happen, Endros thought, even wished.

For, though the Ellrohn were a thousand years ahead of the most advanced of the races they had discovered over the millennia, the Ellrohn themselves had long ago stagnated. Few saw it that way, of course, only a few like Endros who not only had studied Ellrohn history but who were repeatedly exposed to the initial raw vitality of one newly discovered world after another. The bureaucracy didn't allow such thoughts, and the bureaucracy, after ten thousand years, was supreme. An ever-expanding "family of worlds" was, by the bureaucracy's definition, progress, as were new applications of old science.

But nothing, absolutely nothing that was totally new had been discovered by

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the Ellrohn — or by any of their ever-growing "family" — in ten thousand years. The last great "breakthrough" had been the matter transmitter, which had come hard on the heels of the subspace drive, which itself had almost destroyed the Homeworld before a method could be found to even partially control the energy that seeped through the portals from that other, impossible realm through which the ships traveled. Since that time, all of the Ellrohn's energy seemed to have gone into expansion, into the discovery and absorption of other civilizations before those civilizations had a chance to surpass the Ellrohn.

And now another world was about to be gobbled up, turned into yet another Ellrohn clone, and there was nothing he could do about it, even if he had the energy to try.

Rubbing his massive hand over the slate gray of his weary head, Endros made the subvocalizations that caused the lists and descriptions that summarized this planet's science to appear in the air before him. Except for the commander, he had been on more first-choice missions than anyone else on the ship, and hence he had first choice of what he would "observe and investigate." A small privilege, perhaps, but one he would exercise.

Expecting nothing, he skimmed through the list superficially, recognizing all the standard entries. Atomic fusion. Attempts to create and control microscopic black holes. DNA manipulation. Molecular computer memory. The search for free quarks and the dawning suspicion that even they are not the ultimate building blocks. The development of high-temperature superconductors. And on and on and on. Nothing new, nothing unexpected, nothing with a potential that had not long since been surpassed a hundred times over.

Until he found the entry for what was called "psychic research."

Puzzled, he called up more detailed lists and definitions. His puzzlement only grew deeper as he scanned each new entry. He had, of course, encountered proponents of "mind power" on other worlds, but never in this form or with this level of acceptance. In a few pre-atomic cultures, such superstitious beliefs had been widespread, but the advent of the Ellrohn and their science had soon taken care of that. On other, more advanced worlds, remnants of similar magical beliefs existed among the uneducated, but no one of any importance or intelligence took them seriously. Like the body hair that some races retained, such beliefs were treated, rightly, as nothing more than vestigial remains of savagery.

But here, though such ideas were far from being a top priority or universally accepted, there were official government-supported research projects in a half dozen countries, including the two most technologically advanced. There was even, at a secondary level,

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serious consideration of the idea that a "mind" was somehow separate from the brain, that it could even exist separately.

Sheer superstition, of course, but it *would* be a break from the usual dreary routine.

Despite his status as instant celebrity and the hundreds of demands for his time, Paul Gallagher managed to slip away from his pursuers on the second day. The instant he was positive he had made good his escape, he headed directly for Soralda Murchison's lab, where both Soralda and the girl, Lainey Carlisle, had been waiting, anxiously, since Soralda had managed to contact him the day before.

The girl drew back when he entered, not offering her hand. Soralda, in her usual jeans and pullover sweater, watched them both curiously.

"Are you all right, Paul?" she asked as he lowered himself onto one corner of the cluttered desk in the tiny office outside the lab.

"Never felt better. Now what is this all about? Why did you have to see me?"

"The Ellrohn — what happened to you up there?"

It's all been in the papers and everywhere else. You know as well as I do by now."

She shook her head. "No, I mean specifically to you. You alone." She glanced at the girl momentarily. "Specifically, what happened to you at 7:20 P.M., give or take a couple of minutes?"

Frowning, he tried to remember. The Ellrohn messages had all come at a few minutes before 4 P.M., eastern time, so that was also the time at which they had entered the shuttle. The trip had taken only a few minutes at most, and the tour through the "Ellrohn museum of science and industry," as he had dubbed it in his own mind, had taken a little over three hours. He remembered looking at his watch only two or three times, one of which was when they were ushered back to the shuttle at around 7:40. So, twenty minutes before that....

"That was about the end of the tour we were being given," he said, "so that was probably about the time we were having the matter transmitter demonstrated to us."

"You yourself went through at 7:20?"

He shrugged. "I was one of the last to go through, so it could have been 7:20." He looked from one to the other. "What is this all about? I'll admit I was glad for an excuse to hide out from the press and everyone for a while, so your call to come over was welcome, but I still would like to know what is going on."

"You remember Lainey's warning?"

He laughed sharply. "How could I forget it?"

"Whatever she felt when she took your hand that day — well, it happened again, even more powerfully, at 7:20

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the evening you were in the Ellrohn Ship."

He frowned as he looked from one to the other. "And what was it you felt, Miss Carlisle?"

She shook her head. "It's hard to describe to anyone who hasn't felt it," she said. Her voice was soft and timid with an edge of fear in it. Swallowing, she went on. "The closest I can come is to say it felt as if — You're familiar with catheterization?"

He nodded. "They run a little tube through a vein — or is it an artery? — from the arm into the heart."

"Yes, that's what I mean. It was done to me a few months ago, so I knew what it feels like. There isn't much pain involved, partly because the surface of the catheter is virtually frictionless. But this — this feeling that I got from you — It was as if there were catheters running through every vein in my body and that they were lined with sandpaper and were being pulled out simultaneously."

She swallowed again, slumping back on her chair, and Paul felt a momentary queasiness at the image her words conjured up. Then he shook his head.

"Sorry. Nothing like that happened to me. I think that's something I'd remember."

"Yes, you would think so," Soralda said quietly, eyeing the two thoughtfully.

Government officials were, of course, miffed when the first Ellrohn to emerge from the U.S. shuttle indicated he wanted to look at, of all things, Soralda Murchison's so-called "lab" for psychic research. But they of course acquiesced.

They were equally miffed when, arriving at the lab, the Ellrohn — who called himself Endros and looked just like all the other Ellrohn who scattered to other parts of the city and country — insisted on entering alone while his escorts were reduced to what amounted to sentry duty to keep the media and the idly curious away.

Inside, Endros was startled to recognize one of the humans who had been part of the U.S. delegation.

But what followed was even more startling.

Instead of his quizzing *them*, the natives, particularly the one named Soralda Murchison, quizzed *him*, first about the timing of the demonstration of the matter transmitter and then about the machine itself.

In a way, this was a welcome change from the treatment he and the other Ellrohn usually received at this stage. Normally, the natives fell into two categories. One group was totally sycophantic. They accepted the idea of Ellrohn superiority without question and feared that the slightest offense to an Ellrohn could have disastrous results. The other were angry and resentful, realizing that their own science was literally worthless compared to that of the Ellrohn. They were savages

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just discovering fire, while the Ellrohn were jetting across the Atlantic in whisper-silent comfort.

But this human, this Soralda Murchison, fit neither category, and Endros, surprised by this odd departure from the norm, cooperated as fully as he could. The humans, of course, were not able to comprehend the mechanics of the matter transmitter in any meaningful way, but that was hardly surprising. There were reputed to be no more than a hundred Ellrohn out of several trillion who thoroughly understood its inner workings. The best humans could be expected to do was to grasp the loosest of analogies. Unfortunately, the analogy they best understood was that of a three-dimensional version of the scanning process used in their own television transmissions for nearly a century, but it was so misleading as to be almost totally useless. And yet they persisted, and finally he admitted that, yes, "in a manner of speaking," the transmitted matter was converted into "something anlogous to energy" and, at the destination, reconverted into matter. The fact that the "energy" was as different from their concept of energy as a radio wave is different from a sound wave, and the fact that the "energy" itself retained the pattern of the original matter and hence the original matter *became* the "reassembled" matter was beyond their comprehension, just as it was, if he were to be perfectly honest, beyond Endros's own comprehension.

Eventually, he was allowed to question them, and the reason for their concern slowly became clear.

What happened, they wondered, to the "mind" during this transfer? And by "mind," they meant not the brain alone but something nonmaterial for which the brain was merely an extension, the way a computer could be considered an extension of a human operator. Was it, this nonmaterial something, transferred along with the physical body and brain? Or was it lost in transit? Was the being who stepped out of the receiver truly the same being who had stepped into the transmitter? Or was it merely a simulcrum with all the memories — false memories — of the former?

Such nonsense was of course sheer superstition, Endros knew. The Ellrohn had outgrown such foolishness long before the transmitter had been discovered, but still he held back in his retorts to these humans, particularly when the one called Paul Gallagher described the "tingling fear" he and the others had each felt before their first short trip through the transmitter. He remembered the same feeling himself, from the time of his own first use of the transmitter nearly three hundred years before. The feeling, of course, had never recurred, and he had always attributed it to his own childish anticipation of the event.

"We have," Endros admitted diplomatically, "encountered beliefs in nonmaterial components of the mind be-

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fore, but rarely in such seemingly scientific surroundings. But of course no one has ever produced any proof."

The Murchison female shook her head in what Endros had come to recognize as frustration, or perhaps annoyance. Then the younger female, the one who alledgedly was able to sometimes communicate with such nonmaterial entities, came forward. She was trembling as she held her hands out toward his.

He started to draw back, realizing he was becoming tired of these proceedings. It had seemed interesting at first glance, but now it was becoming nonsensical. And the younger female was acting very strangely. He would have to cut it off soon, he decided.

But she was stepping even closer to him. She was trembling even more than before, and she was reaching out to touch his hand. A little afraid, feeling some of the same tingle he had felt those long years ago before his initiation with the transmitter, he started to ask what she wanted.

But then, without a word, she was touching him. Both of her hands closed over one of his, and she stiffened. Then her hands, frail and insubstantial compared to his own, tightened so powerfully it was almost painful to him. And her face went pale, becoming nearly as gray as his own.

A whimpering sound that his translator disk could do nothing with came from between her clenched teeth. And then she began to speak. The words made little sense at first, but then, as he listened more closely, he realized she was describing his own home on the Homeworld. His own home as it had existed on the eve of his first use of the transmitter.

And then, suddenly, he realized something else, something that was totally impossible, something that could not be happening.

She was speaking in his own native language. His translator disk was silent.

He snatched his hand back, almost jerking the woman from her feet. For a moment the words continued, and then she collapsed backward into the arms of the other two humans.

Endros remained in the lab for another hour, and then another.

There was no way he could shake the younger female's story and no way he could explain what she had done, no matter what her explanation.

When she had touched him, she said, she had experienced the same almost unbearable pain she had experienced before when she had touched the male named Gallagher and again when he had gone through the transmitter on the Ellrohn Ship. But this time, she had somehow controlled the pain, or controlled her reaction to it, and she had reached beyond.

She had, she said, touched whatever it was that had been "torn out" of Endros on that day three hundred years

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ago. It still existed, somewhere in a nonmaterial limbo that she and others like her could, under the right conditions, occasionally contact. It still existed, but it was no longer a part of Endros.

Endros — and now the few humans who had been on the Ellrohn Ship — were still living, but now they were purely physical beings. The nonmaterial element, whatever it was, had been torn free, and the pain she had felt was the pain *it* had felt at the separation.

He could not shake her story nor explain it, and, because of the Ellrohn words and sentences she had mouthed, he eventually had to believe her.

And as he returned to the Ship, the implications of what those "backward natives" had said — and proved — gradually expanded until they encompassed more than ten thousand years of Ellrohn history and nearly as many other worlds. And the strength of his conviction that they were right grew stronger with each passing moment.

It would explain so much, so very, very much.

The source of the "intuition" necessary for scientific breakthroughs or for anything beyond what sheer mechanical logic and random chance could accomplish was in this nonmaterial something that normally existed within — as a part of? as the controller of? — the physical brain. A computer could do anything it was programmed to do. It could even reprogram itself in seemingly infinite ways. But when it came down to something truly original, an Ellrohn — or a human, or any of the thousands of other races the Ellrohn had absorbed — had to initiate it.

And neither the Ellrohn nor any of their "family" had accomplished anything truly original in ten thousand years. Since virtually every living, intelligent creature, Ellrohn or otherwise, had begun to use the matter transmitter routinely, nothing new had been discovered, anywhere.

The problem of the energy leakage through the portals to subspace had not been solved in ten thousand years. It had been reduced slightly during the first years after its discovery — which were the years immediately preceding the discovery of the matter transmitter — but it had remained at that level ever since. The only solution so far was to always generate those portals at a great distance from the nearest inhabited planet.

That was the only solution the Ellrohn had been able to find. In ten thousand years.

And in those ten thousand years, the Ellrohn had brought thousands of other races into the same condition.

And they would continue, until and unless some race escaped their notice and was allowed to develop independently, without the Ellrohn and their transmitter.

But what could he do? What could one lone Ellrohn do? No one would listen. Oh, perhaps one here and one there, but the monolith that was the

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Ellrohn bureaucracy would not listen, not after ten thousand years of complacent certainty.

But by the time he entered the Ship, he had decided what he must at least *try* to do.

Paul Gallagher took a last look at his words as they spread across the display screen and waited for him to key in his approval. As a member of the original U.S. delegation to the Ellrohn Ship, but more important, as the last human to have had contact with the Ellrohn before the Ship had vanished in a soundless explosion, his "eulogy" for the Ellrohn would be heard by the entire world. Everyone would listen, and everyone would know its importance. But only Paul Gallagher and one other would know just how important, not only symbolically but realistically, it really was.

And no one but himself and that one other would know how great a lie he would be telling.

He wished he could tell the truth, but he knew that he could not. No one would believe it, and Endros's sacrifice would have been for nothing..

He could not reveal what that last communication from the Ship, transmitted only to him even though the fact of its transmission had been broadcast to the entire world, had told him. He could not tell how one lone Ellrohn, the one named Endros, had managed to manipulate the Ship's computer so that all references to Earth were erased, not only from that computer but from all the linked computers in other Ships and on the Homeworld itself. He could not tell them that, for the Ellrohn, neither Earth nor the Ship existed anymore. They had never existed.

And he certainly could not tell Earth how that same Ellrohn, who would doubtless be considered insane by most of his fellows and by most humans as well, had given Earth and its billions a little breathing room, a few short millennia in which to do their own research into the nature and function of the "nonmaterial consciousness" that the Ellrohn and all other advanced civilizations so derided. No, he could never tell how Endros had somehow outwitted all the safety devices and brought an actual, physical end to the Ship that had already been snuffed out of existence in all the distant computer banks.

Paul looked again at the lines on the screen that spoke of the "legacy of the Ellrohn, not the promised legacy of scientific hardware but a legacy of belief and inspiration," and he wished that it could be better, that it could be more inspired.

But it was too late for Paul Gallagher to do anything truly "inspired." His trip to the Ellrohn Ship had taken care of that.

But for humanity, there was still time. There was still time....

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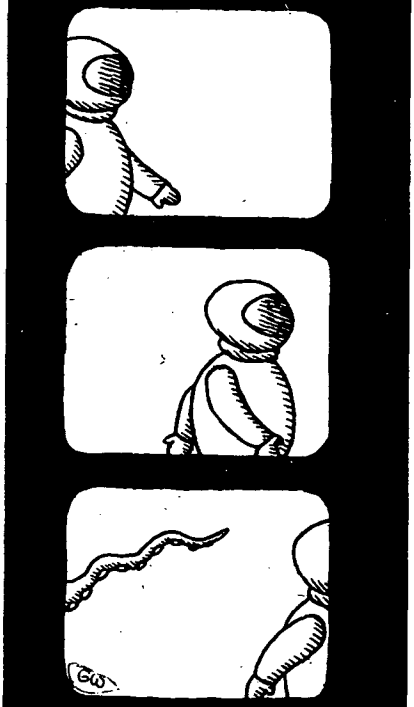
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

MESS MEDIA

It has been a fascinating process over the years watching heroic fantasy (or "pure fantasy," Tolkienesque fantasy, or swords and sorcery — all terms used to differentiate this subgenre from science fiction and supernatural literature) grow from a handful of stories read by a few devotees into a major publishing phenomenon, and then spread into the mass media. Probably the massest medium of our time is the TV series (witness the viewing figure for the final M*A*S*H), and we now have a heroic fantasy series in network prime time; the field has gone as far (or as low) as it can get.

Given the TV perchant for naming series after weapons, I'm surprised it wasn't dubbed "Broadsword Blade" or Macmillan and Mace," but it ended up being called, straightforwardly, "Wizards and Warriors." This is obviously a reference to the late, lamented (?) gaming fad, which the programmers figured was the major association with fantasy in the public mind.

They also seemed to go on the usual assumption in dealing with s/F or fantasy that, being such, it doesn't have to make sense, so the initial episode was clearly one that came later, essentially plopping the viewer into a situation that had already been set up. The second episode was the first of a two-parter, which *did* include the expository material, for some reason being done as a flashback told by the

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resident wizard. *Not* a good start.

While there was no hope that this would be serious heroic fantasy, with the power and beauty of which the field is capable, it could have been a de Campy romp, with some wit and humor for the grownups as well as the standard demons and mindless swordplay. There's evidence that this was what was aimed for, but so far the wit (and imagination) are in pretty short supply.

The hero is named Erik Greystone, and he is supposed to be a young, blond, and handsome prince. Unfortunately, the actor employed is a bit seamed for youth, and a bit bleached for blond. And too seamed and bleached for handsome. The villian, Dirk Blackpool, is altogether more appealing, but speaks with one of those mid-Atlantic accents which is supposed to indicate effete unpleasantness. The principal females are a major setback for women's lib — there's not a bearable lady in view: Blackpool's associate Bethel is a thoroughly unpleasant witch, and the Princess Ariel is a thoroughly unpleasant bitch, a Jewish American Princess who doesn't happen to be Jewish or American. (However, Bethel's wardrobe is the most campily revealing since that of Princess Ardala's in *Buck Rogers.*) And there are the usual nasty demons, pet unicorns (here named Pumpkin), smug and/or sneering wizards, and bumbling kings.

Since series can change drastically, I won't devote an entire column to W&W this time, but continue commentary on the evidence of further episodes at a later date.

I've devoted space to it before, but I shall continue to mention it on the occasions I'm lucky enough to resee it, in hopes that a masterpiece of television fantasy will not become a totally forgotten work. It is the three-part series, "An Englishman's Castle," made by the BBC and first seen here about five years ago on various PBS stations. It surfaces every once in a while, but its form (three hour-long episodes) and content do not make for convenient scheduling, and the program could well end up in limbo, forgotten.

It confirms my continuing thesis that the greatest s/f and fantasy films and TV plays are those that are original scripts, and not based on literary works. The ongoing problem here, of course, is to find practiced writers for the screen that also have that necessary sensibility for great s/f and fantasy. "An Englishman's Castle" might just be the best alternate time story I've ever run across; it is laid in the late 1970s, in an England in which Germany has won WW II. The central character is the writer and producer of a TV soap opera, immensely popular in Britain and the rest of Nazi-dominated Europe, that is set in 1940 and which chronicles the heroic English resistence to the invasion, but in the safest, nostagically propogandistic way ("wasn't

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it awful then, and isn't everything great now").

This device, which cleverly gives the viewer the alternate history as well as providing an ironic double level, is typical of the intelligence which characterizes this production. Even the sets and costumes are only a *bit* off, contemporary but just slightly smacking of the 1940s; a conquered Europe *would* be conservative.

Dramatically, the play is also compelling; it's practically a textbook example of the necessity in science fiction for the plot to arise out of the speculative elements, rather than being just laid on them. Here we see the hero gradually being drawn into the underground and eventually using his show as a signal for the British revolt against its puppet government; there's a powerful personal drama also. It's emotionally involving and has *real* excitement, not the fake stuff purveyed for the most part on TV; there are precious few examples of screen fantasy and s/f that have those qualities.

The fact that one of the smaller PBS stations in my area just showed it proves that it's still around; keep an eye on your local listings, or, if you're of an aggressive temperament, write your local noncommercial station and ask them to air it.

Things-to-come dept.

...Maybe the worst idea of the decade is the upcoming remake of the beautiful 1946 movie, *Stairway To Heaven*, this time with John Travolta and Olivia Newton John. It was the only one of those '40s whimsies concerned with meddlesome angels and heavenly mistakes that didn't have a trace of stickiness; one shudders at what will be remade of it.

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Pamela Sargent's new novels include THE ALIEN UPSTAIRS (Doubleday) and EARTHSEED (Harper). Her latest story for F&SF concerns a small group caught in a power failure, and if you thought there was something romantic about a blackout, this story may change your mind.

The Old Darkness

BY

PAMELA SARGENT

The kitchen window was white with light; a thousand invisible hands clapped in unison. Nina tensed. The kitchen was suddenly dark; outside, the wind howled as rain drummed against the window.

"What was that?" Andrew shouted from the living room.

"I don't know. It sounded like something hit the house."

"It had to happen now — bottom of the ninth, with a tie." She heard her husband shuffle through the hallway toward the kitchen. It was growing darker outside; evening's dim gray light was fading.

"I don't know what I'm going to do about supper," Nina said, staring at her now-useless food processor. "I was just going to chop the onions."

Andrew leaned against the refrigerator. "You used to chop them without that thing."

"I know, but it's made me lazy. I can't do anything without it." She crossed the room, crept into the hall and opened the door, peering into the dark corridor. "Everything's out."

"Nina?"

She recognized her neighbor's voice. "Rosalie?"

"Yeah, it's me. I looked outside a second ago. I can't see a light on the whole street."

"Damn it," Nina said. "I was fixing supper."

"Well, the gas is still on. Just be glad you don't have an electric stove."

Nina cleared her throat. The darkness was making her uneasy; the air in the hallway seemed heavy and thick. She backed into her apartment, closing the door.

Andrew was still in the kitchen, dialing a number. "Who are you calling?" she asked.

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"Power company. Hello? Yeah, I wanted to ask — O.K., I'll wait." He leaned against the wall. Thunder rolled overhead as Nina went to the window; the wind shrieked. The rain was a silver sheet nearly parallel to the ground, a curtain buffeted by the wind.

"Hello? Yeah, I just wanted to know — uh-huh. We're on the north side. Yeah." Andrew paused. "How soon? Uh-huh. O.K. Well, thanks." He hung up. "One of the main lines is down. They said they should have it fixed in an hour or two."

"I guess we can eat late. I can't make this dish without the Cuisinart."

"Oh, come on. You can get along without electricity."

"I can't even see what I'm doing."

"We've got candles. I'll set some up for you. We've got a flashlight." He rummaged in one drawer, pulling out a box of matches. "We can rough it for one evening."

Nina finished preparing dinner by the flickering yellow light of the candles. Andrew had set one on the stove, another on the counter top, and two more on the table, with a mirror behind them to catch the light.

She shivered. The air seemed unusually cold, in spite of the oven's heat. She felt oddly vulnerable without the familiar presence of electricity, unable to prepare food without it, unable to read — she couldn't even dry her long, thick hair without a hair dryer. The artifacts of technology had only made her more incompetent; she thought of the past, imagining families going about their tasks as the sun set, reading to one another by the light of a fire, drawing close against the night.

Her grandparents, believers in progress, had always told her things were better now. Human minds had been darker when people couldn't read late at night, their prejudices greater when they had lacked television's images of other places, their work harder without the appliances many took for granted. Nina was not so sure; technical civilization had isolated people from the basics of life, and had fooled them into believing that they controlled the world.

Andrew set the table, then put a portable radio and cassette player near the candles. "This isn't so bad. Kind of romantic, actually. We should do this more often."

"They still haven't repaired the line."

"They will."

"Everything in the freezer's going to get ruined."

"Forget about the freezer. It'll keep. Just don't open the door." He uncorked a bottle of wine while she served the stuffed peppers.

As she carried the plates to the table, the thunder rumbled again. Storms had always frightened her, and the darkness beyond the lighted room was filled with threatening shadows. She sat down, facing the mirror. The smell of melting wax mingled with the

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odor of tomato sauce and spices.

"We've got food. We've even got music." Andrew's voice sounded hollow and distant. A dark shadow loomed behind Nina, about to cloak her in black; she stared at the mirror, afraid to move. Andrew popped a cassette into the player, and the sound of Bach filled the room.

The music was soothing. Andrew began to conduct with his fork. "Magnificat," he bellowed, along with the chorus.

A fist pounded on the door. Nina started. "Who is it?"

"Rosalie."

That surprised her; Rosalie usually had a gentle, tentative knock. As Nina left the light of the kitchen, the air pressed in around her; she was once again afraid. She opened the door. "Come on in."

The words were hardly out of her mouth before her neighbor was inside. Rosalie panted, then leaned against the wall, hands over her belly. Nina took her arm and led Rosalie into the kitchen, seating her across from Andrew.

"I'm all right now," Rosalie said. "It's the dark. I guess it got to me. I really got scared."

"It's O.K. Do you want a pepper?"

Rosalie shook her head, but accepted a glass of wine from Andrew. "I wouldn't have come over, but I couldn't stay there alone. I was going to go over to Jeff's, but the radio said people should stay off the roads — the wind's knocking down trees."

"Where's Lisanne?"

"At her father's for the weekend." Rosalie lifted her glass; her hand was shaking. She sipped some wine. "All I've got is a flashlight, so I wasn't very prepared."

Andrew turned down the music; a shadow in the corner seemed to darken. "I felt it, too," Nina said. "I got the creeps when I went to answer the door."

"You're too suggestible," Andrew said in a loud voice.

"It was cold," Rosalie said in a flat tone as the candlelight flickered on her face, adding a golden glow to her coppery hair. "I was in the living room, and I felt a cold spot, right in the center of the room. Then the O'Haras started screaming at each other — I could hear them through the floor."

"The O'Haras were fighting?" Nina said, surprised.

"You bet. I didn't know she knew that kind of language. The living room got colder. Something was breathing down my neck, and I thought I heard a sigh. Then I thought, if I don't get out of here, I'll be trapped — I won't be able to —"

"A draft." Andrew gestured with his knife. "There's always a draft in this building."

"It wasn't a draft. The air was just sitting there."

Nina tried to smile. "It's a good thing my grandparents aren't here. They'd be telling old stories by now. You know, there's a legend that the

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first people who settled in this valley disappeared — just vanished into the woods. And once —" Andrew was warning her with his eyes. "It's just a story. No one believes it."

"You grew up here, didn't you?" Rosalie asked.

Nina nodded. "Lived here all my life, except for college." The rest of her family had left, moving to places of warmth and light, while she had remained behind, afraid to live among strangers unilluminated by familiarity.

The Bach cantata came to an end; Andrew clicked off the cassette player.

"They *still* haven't repaired the line," Nina said.

"The storm's probably worse than they expected." Rosalie's voice echoed in the kitchen. The room was darker; the candle on the stove had gone out. The shadow in the corner was now a misshapen birdlike figure; its wing tips fluttered. "I hope," Rosalie went on, "that you've got more candles. These won't last much longer."

"There's a scented one in the living room." Andrew stood up. "I'd better go get it."

"Take the flashlight," Nina said.

"I can find my way."

Nina turned toward her neighbor as Andrew left the kitchen. She was about to speak when she saw Rosalie's lips draw back over her teeth; the woman was a predator, her jaws ready to bite, her hands claws. "That bastard," Rosalie said softly. "Ever since our divorce, he's been making Lisanne think he's the good guy. I'll bet he's telling her right now that it was all my fault."

Nina drew back. Rosalie had always been on good terms with her ex-husband; their divorce had been notable for its lack of rancor. "He was the one who wanted it," Rosalie continued. "He manipulated me into court, and I didn't even see it. I thought he was being nice, and so I got screwed on the settlement — he knew I wouldn't fight it."

Nina felt trapped. The kitchen seemed small, the walls too close. Then she heard a thud in the front of the apartment, and a cry.

She jumped up, grabbed the flashlight from the counter, and hurried into the living room. "Andy?"

He was lying on the floor, his face pale in the flashlight's beam. "Something hit me." He picked up a thick book and put it on the coffee table.

"Are you all right?" She knelt beside him. He nodded, rubbing his head. "You'd better put up another shelf."

"I haven't had time."

"Then get rid of some of that junk." Nina's voice was sharp. "It's taking over the place. Pretty soon, we'll have to get an apartment just for the books." She was shouting, longing to sweep the rows of hardcover mysteries from the shelves and hurl them into the rain. "And you never do your share of the dusting, either." She took a breath, feeling light-headed; the feeling of oppression had lifted.

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A candle danced in the darkness, illuminating Rosalie's face. "Anything wrong?"

Nina sighed as Andrew climbed to his feet. "Book hit me in the head, that's all."

Andrew cleared the table and put the dirty dishes into the sink, then moved their remaining candles into the living room, along with the cassette player. He lighted only the scented candle, saving the others.

"We've got about three or four hours' worth of candles," he said. "They have to have the line repaired by then." Nina, listening to the whine of the wind, was not so sure.

Andrew turned on the cassette player. Voices singing God's praises wavered, missing a few notes. He hit the machine, then turned it off.

"Haven't you got anything else?" Rosalie asked.

"I've got Vivaldi, and Handel, and some —"

"I should have brought my tapes," Rosalie interrupted. "Unfortunately, I left them in my car." She glanced at the window. "And I'm not going out in that."

Andrew said, "I can't say I'm sorry."

Rosalie lifted her head. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I can't stand that music you're always playing — if you can even call it music."

"And just what's wrong with it?"

"It's all screaming and percussion — a perfect example of human primitivism and banality."

"Really! I suppose you think that Tinkertoy music is better."

"Don't call it Tinkertoy music."

"It's boring," Rosalie said. "It's all the same."

"How can you say that?"

"Stop it!" Nina shouted. Rosalie sank back on the couch; Andrew, seated on the floor, draped one arm over the coffee table. "We don't have to argue about it." Nina's stomach was tight with tension; she wondered if the stuffed peppers were giving her indigestion. "It's a matter of taste."

Lightning brightened the room for an instant; Andrew's moustache was black against his face. "It's a matter of taste, all right," he said. "Good taste and bad."

Before Rosalie could respond, he had turned on the music again. Andrew shook his head. "I'm sorry, Rosalie."

"It's O.K. I'm sorry, too."

Nina heard footsteps on the stairs, then a knock on the door; a child squealed. "I'll get it," Andrew said.

As he made his way out of the room, Nina leaned toward Rosalie. "He didn't mean it."

"I know. I feel all right now. I just wanted to lash out at someone all of a sudden."

Andrew was speaking to their callers; Nina recognized the voices of Jill

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and Tony Levitas. Their daughter Melanie preceded them into the room, sat down at one end of the sofa, and began to suck her thumb. The music sounded sluggish; Nina turned off the cassette player.

"Sorry," Jill said as she sat in a chair. "We didn't want to come upstairs, but — I don't know how to put it."

"You were getting the creeps," Rosalie said. "That's why I came over."

Jill lowered her voice. "Our dining room table started to move — honest to God. Then Melanie got hysterical. She said there was something in her room, and she refused to go to bed. She's never been afraid of the dark before."

Rosalie said, "The O'Hara's were fighting. Can you believe it?"

"I heard them. It sounded pretty grim."

"I brought a libation," Tony said, setting a jug of wine on the table. Andrew came in with more glasses and poured the wine, then retreated to a corner with Tony.

"We were going to go out tonight," Jill said. "Then the babysitter called, and said she couldn't make it — a tree fell in her driveway. Not that it matters — the theater's probably blacked out, too. So we're stuck."

"Steinbrenner should just leave them alone and let them play ball," Andrew was saying.

"He's paying them." Tony wrapped his arms around his long, thin legs.

"Of course, we have to have this storm on practically the first night in months we were going out," Jill said bitterly. "And it'll probably be ages before we go out again. Let that be a lesson to you, Nina." Two reflected flames fluttered on Jill's glasses. "Don't have a kid until you've done everything you want to do, because you don't get a chance later on. And don't expect your husband to help."

"I heard that," Tony said.

"It's true."

"Look, I have to work. I do my share on the weekends."

"You were the one who talked me into quitting my job."

"Because it would have cost us more for you to work."

"So what? Doesn't my peace of mind mean anything to you?"

"Jill! You *hated* that job."

"At least I was with adults. I'm regressing. The biggest intellectual effort I make now is comparing the merits of 'General Hospital' with 'The Young and The Restless.'"

"You wanted the kid, Jill."

"*You* wanted her!"

"You know what your trouble is?" Tony's voice was unusually high. "You never bothered to look for a job you liked, because you thought some man would take care of you. Now you're bitching because you don't like housework. Well, make up your mind."

Melanie curled up, covering her head with her hands. Nina rubbed her arms; the room felt cold. Something

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rustled; she heard a crack. Several books flew off the shelves, crashing to the floor; one struck her in the back.

She jumped up. Inside her, a snake uncoiled, creeping up to her throat. "Damn it, Andy! Do you have to get so many books?" She was shouting again. She rarely shouted, and she had done so twice in a few minutes. She strode to the window, peering out at the storm. Lights twinkled on a distant hill, reminding her of stars; at least the South Side still had power.

Five men, barely visible, were on the sidewalk below. They were drinking, ignoring the rain that drenched them. Water streamed from their jackets and hair, making them look as though they were melting. One man held his beer bottle by its top, then pitched it over the fence into the front yard.

"Shit," Nina muttered. "Somebody just threw a bottle into the yard."

Andrew was at her side. He pushed up the window, then opened the storm window behind it. Rain sprayed Nina's face.

"Hey!" Andrew shouted above the wind as he shone his flashlight on the litterers. "Pick up your bottle!" The men were still. "Don't throw your crap in our yard."

Another man drew his arm back; a bottle flew, smashing against the side of the building. A second bottle followed it, landing in the branches of the pine tree.

Nina closed the storm window hastily. "Call the police."

"You can't," Tony responded. "The phones are out now. I tried to call you before we came upstairs."

Andrew turned off the flashlight. "I've seen those guys before. They never acted like that."

Melanie whimpered and began to cry. "Hush," Jill said. Melanie wailed. "Be quiet!"

Rosalie reached for the child, trying to soothe her. "Leave her alone."

"There's something to be said for divorce," Jill said. "At least you get to unload Lisanne once in a while. How's that sound, Tony? I'll even give you custody."

"Shut up, Jill."

"I'll even pay child support."

Tony lumbered across the room. "Shut up, damn it."

"I don't know what you're complaining about," Rosalie cried. "I wish I had more time with my kid. That goddamned Elliott made sure he had someone else lined up before he told me he wanted a divorce."

Nina leaned against the window sill. The bitter voices seemed far away, the harsh words dim. The room was warmer, as if her friends' anger had driven away the cold. She gazed at the fluttering shadows near the couch, surprised that the placid Jill and the cheerful Rosalie had such strong feelings.

Andrew gulped down his wine, reached for the jug, and poured another glass. A breath of air tickled Nina's ear. "He's had enough to drink." The

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voice was so low she could barely hear it; she looked around quickly. "He can't handle it. He never could hold his liquor." Before she could see where the voice was coming from, rage had taken hold of her; she clenched her fists.

Andrew knelt, hitting the cassette player. "Damn battery's dead. Go get some more."

Nina said, "There aren't any more."

"You mean you didn't pick any up?"

"I was going to get some tomorrow." She screamed the words. "You expect me to remember everything."

Andrew poured himself more wine. Nina reached for the bottle; he pulled it away.

"You've had enough, Andy."

"Get off my case." He gulped the wine defiantly.

"Andy, stop it. You know you can't drink that much."

"I'll do what I please. I don't need your permission."

"He'll be a drunk, just like his father," the voice sighed.

"You'll be like your father," Nina said. "You'll drink yourself right into the hospital."

"It's only wine, for Christ's sake." Andrew stood up. "I can't tell you how many times I've wanted to tie one on, and how many times I resisted. You and your nagging. Leave me alone. You'd like to see me drunk, wouldn't you, just to prove your point."

Nina heard a slap. "You son of a bitch!" Jill shouted. "Now you're turning into a wife beater. Go ahead, hit me again."

Tony said, "I'll give you more than a slap next time."

Nina wanted to scream. The voice was whispering again. "Jill always has her television set on too loud. And Tony forgets to mow the lawn. And Melanie leaves her toys on the stairs." She covered her ears, but could still hear the voice. "Admit it," the voice said. "You hate them."

"No!" Nina cried. Melanie had stopped weeping; the racking sobs she heard now were Rosalie's. "We've got to stop this." She felt a sharp pain in her chest, and gasped for air. The room was darker; the walls creaked as the wind outside gusted. "We've never had arguments before — what's the matter with us?" The pain was worse; she sat down, clutching her abdomen. She hated everyone in the room, and the only way she could get rid of the hate was to let it out.

"She's right," Tony said; his voice sounded hoarse. The coffee table rattled; the candle danced. Another book flew across the room, hitting the wall with a thud. The whispers were now so pronounced that Nina could barely hear anything else.

"You know what it is?" Tony said, cackling. "I didn't bless the wine. My parents always told me to bless my food or it would do bad things to me." His voice cracked as he sang a prayer in Hebrew.

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Nina's pain was fading. She sniffed; the air, so heavy before, now smelled clean. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," Tony replied.

"Keep praying," Andrew said. Tony sang another prayer. "That's it. If we only had some batteries — we could play more Bach."

"What's that got to do with it?" Rosalie asked.

"It's sacred music. Didn't you notice? When the cassette was on, we were O.K. Now Tony's praying, and I can't hear those voices anymore."

"You heard them, too?"

"I think we all did."

Nina reached for Andrew's hand. Tony paused for breath; Rosalie began to sing "Rock of Ages." "It's the power failure," Andrew went on. "It's as if electricity is some sort of white magic, keeping things in check. Now we have to use older magic."

Nina trembled. An unseen hand pressed against her head, waiting to crush her when the songs failed. She had always dismissed her grandparents' lore, and even they had not taken it all that seriously. Now she recalled their tales of objects flying across rooms, of occasional murders which usually happened at night, of people barring their doors against the darkness.

"I can't believe it," Tony said. "This is the twentieth century, for God's sake." Rosalie was now singing "Amazing Grace"; her voice faltered on the high notes.

Out in the kitchen, a dish smashed to the floor. The candle on the coffee table went out.

Nina felt as though she were at the center of a vortex; unseen beings whirled around her. Rosalie continued to sing as Andrew lit the candle. The walls, Nina felt, would cave in on her; whatever was with them would not be held off by a few simple songs and prayers.

"We have to get out of here," Andrew said. "The South Side still has power. We ought to be safe there."

"We can't," Jill replied. "It's too risky. They told people to stay off the roads unless it's an emergency."

"This is an emergency. I think we should get into our cars and go."

"No," Rosalie said as Tony began to sing. "We're safer here."

"As long as you keep singing." Books hopped on the shelves. "And maybe not even then."

"Andy's right," Nina said. A cushion of cold air seemed to swallow her words. "Please come with us." She glanced at the sofa. "At least let us take Melanie."

"No," Jill said, moving toward the child and shielding her with one arm.

Nina retreated to the door with Andrew. At the end of the hall, the refrigerator rattled; more dishes fell. She reached for her purse, pulling it off a hook. "I'd better drive. You can't with all that wine in you." The words

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sounded harsher than she had intended; the pain was returning.

Andrew opened the door. Nina looked back at her neighbors, who were huddled around the candle; a misty barrier now separated her from them. She crept into the hall and down the darkened stairway, clinging to the railing. There was an ominous silence behind the O'Hara's door.

As she opened the front door, the wind nearly tore it from her grasp; she hung on. Andrew took her purse, fumbling for the car keys. She pushed the door shut.

He threw her the purse and sprinted toward the car, which was parked across the street. A large puddle had formed on the lawn, reaching to the sidewalk. Rain poured over her, plastering her clothes against her body. Next door, a man stood outside his house, screaming at the porch. Nina could not see the rest of the street: the sky, dark as it was, seemed lighter than the black earth below it.

Lightning lit her way. A shape was crouching near the building; it barked. "Oscar," she murmured, recognizing the O'Haras' dachshund and wondering what it was doing outside. "Poor thing."

The dog leaped at her, biting at her leg. Claws and teeth tore at her jeans. She swung her purse, hitting the animal in the head and knocking it against the door.

"Come on, Nina!" She ran for the car, climbing in next to Andrew, and started the engine. Windshield wipers fanned back and forth, but the rain was so heavy she could see nothing else.

She turned on the headlights. The car crawled down the road. A tree had fallen, blocking the left side of the street; a group of people were in the right lane. Some were grinning; the headlights caught the white of their teeth and made their eyes gleam.

Nina honked her horn. The crowd rushed the car. She braked. Fists beat against the windows; the car rocked.

"Get going!" Andrew shouted.

She gunned the motor. The car shot forward; the people dropped away. She made a right turn, toward the south. "We'll make it," Andrew said. "Not much farther to go."

The car stalled. Nina turned the key, pumping the pedal. "Damn." The motor turned over and died. "What's wrong with it?"

"I don't know."

"You forgot to take it to the garage. I told you, and you forgot."

"I didn't have time."

"Damn it, Andy!" She struck at him; he grabbed her fists, holding her back. She tried to kick.

"Nina!" He shook her. "We'll have to walk, that's all."

"Out there?"

"You're already soaked. Come on."

They got out of the car. As they ran to the sidewalk, the wind howled, nearly knocking Nina to the ground. She heard a sharp crack. A tree toppled

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over, smashing the abandoned car.

Andrew grabbed her arm, leading her down the darkened street.

A dark mass milled in front of the shopping center; Nina heard the sound of shattering glass. Two men brushed past her, carrying a case of bourbon; a boy hurried by with a portable television set.

A crowd had gathered in front of the blacked-out stores. Several people were inside, hurling clothes, small appliances, and bottles through the broken windows to those in the parking lot.

Andrew stopped. Nina tugged at his arm. "We'd better get going!" she shouted. "The police will be here pretty soon." Alarms powered by batteries whined and clanged; the crowd cheered as a microwave oven hurtled through one window. She looked around hastily, wondering where the police were.

Another mob was running toward them; Nina and Andrew were suddenly in the midst of the crowd, being pushed toward the stores. She reached for her husband and clutched air.

"Andy!" She struggled to stay on her feet, afraid she would be trampled if she fell. "Andy!"

A toaster flew past her, hitting another woman, who dropped out of sight. A few people were carrying flashlights, holding them as if they were torches. A young girl raced past, her arms filled with jeans. Nina reached out for a post and held on as the crowd surged toward the liquor store.

Several people were lying on the walkway; she heard groans. Lightning lit up the scene; Nina imagined that she saw a black pool of blood near one man's head. "Andy!"

"Nina."

Andrew was near her, sprawled on the ground. She leaned over, pulling at him. He moaned. "My leg — it's hurt."

She pulled him up; he leaned against her heavily. More people ran past them, joining the crowd looting the nearby hardware store. "I don't think I can make it. You'd better leave me."

"Save yourself," the voice whispered.

"I won't!" Nina shouted. She said a prayer as she hauled Andrew through the parking lot and toward the road.

The wind had died down; the rain was falling more slowly. Trees threatened Nina with their branches as she passed, swatting at her as she struggled along with the limping Andrew. She was muttering prayers almost automatically, surprised that she, who had not said them in years, could remember so many.

They passed a lawn littered with furniture, and heard a distant scream. A beam blinded her for a moment; pebbles struck her as children laughed. Nina flailed at the air with her free arm. The flashlight fled from her as the children retreated.

She peered through the rain, seeing

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a hazy golden glow. "Light," she said. "We're almost there." She could now make out streetlights and tried to move faster; Andrew was slowing her down. She said, "You won't get me." A lighted road wound up a hill; an electric company truck was blocking it. She moved toward the truck.

A police car was parked under a streetlight, near the truck. Leading Andrew toward it, she approached the boundary between darkness and light, then stopped.

She tried to step forward and could not; something was holding her back. She pushed; her knees locked.

"No!" she screamed.

A door opened on one side of the police car; a man in a slicker hurried toward her. "What are you doing out here?" he shouted.

"Help us," she said, stretching out an arm. She couldn't reach him. He grabbed at her, then fell back.

"We can't get in," the policeman said. "We've tried. We're still trying."

"And you can't get out," the voice whispered.

She tried to step forward again, and felt herself stumble back; Andrew slipped to the ground.

"I can't help you, lady." The policeman waved his arms helplessly. "I wish I could."

She sank to the ground, cradling Andrew in her arms. The night was suddenly brighter; she was having delusions, seeing the light she longed for. The wind howled its rage. Arms seized her; she held on to Andrew.

"Come on, lady!" The policeman was holding her; he had reached her somehow. He let go and pulled Andrew up. She stumbled to her feet and followed the two men to the car, where the policeman's partner was waiting.

"Look!" the partner shouted.

Nina turned. Her side of town was now starry with light. A solid blackness lifted from the ground, then began to roll back toward the hills in the north. "We're safe," she said to Andrew. "We're safe." The policeman was shaking his head as he gazed at the ebony fog.

Sparks danced along a power line overhead; the line snapped, writhing down at them like a snake. They dragged Andrew to the car. The North Side was once again dark, and growing darker; soon the impenetrable darkness was so thick that Nina, safe in the light, could not see through the blackness at all.

She had dozed off. Nina awoke with a start, shook herself, and got out of the police car.

The rain had stopped. In the dim light, she could see a medic wrapping a bandage around Andrew's leg. A crowd stood in the street, staring at the black veil before them.

"It's on!" a man's voice shouted. "Power's back!"

As the sun peeped over the hills to Nina's right, the black wall rolled away, defeated by the light. Someone

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cried out. Only blackened earth lay where the darkness had been; the gloom had taken everything away, leaving only a vast, scarred plain. Only the power lines, the town's humming sentries, remained on the ravaged North Side.

Nina thought of her friends, trapped forever in the dark. Where, she wondered, would the darkness go? She knew. It would retreat to the edge of the world, and into the people she knew, and into her; she could feel it lurking there even now, hiding in her mind's shadows with her fears. It would wait for the white magic to fail.

"A take-over bid of some sorts?"

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When a computer is down, where exactly is it?

The Secret Mitty of Walter Life

BY
JOHN M. LANDSBERG

"We're going through!" Commander Mitty's voice was like thin radiation-belt static. He wore his full-dress uniform, with the lightning-bolt insignia on each shoulder.

"We can't make it, sir. It's spoiling for an ion storm, if you ask me."

"I'm not asking you, Lieutenant Berg," said Mitty. "Throw on the meteor deflectors! Rev her up to eighty-five million! We're going through!"

The pounding of the hyper-warp engines increased: ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-*pocketa-pocketa*. Mitty stared at the meteors that were slipping past the deflectors and hammering at the pilot window.

"Prepare to change course to sixteen hundred."

"Sixteen hundred!" cried Lieutenant Berg. "If we try to change to sixteen hundred from our present course we'll be torn to pieces!"

Mitty trained a cold gray eye on the green junior officer. "Better that than be torn to pieces by those Jejoonian devils behind us." A faint, fleeting smile came to his lips.

The crew, bending to their various tasks in the huge, hurtling interstellar man-o'-war, looked at each other and grinned. "The Old Man'll get us through," they said to one another. "The Old Man ain't afraid of hell!"

"Commander!" cried one of the crewmen. Mitty turned. Navigator MacMillan had collapsed.

"My God, Commander," said ship's doctor Renshaw, who happened to be on the bridge. "It must be his emplaresis. There's only one physician on this side of the galaxy who knows how to handle emplaresis, and he's a thousand light-years away!"

"No time for gloves, Doctor," said Mitty, in a low, cool voice. "As-

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tro-scalpel, please."

Mitty began to operate. Except for the clanging of the meteors, silence gripped the cabin for the next three minutes. At last Renshaw said, "Sir, that's the most brilliant suglofusion of a tertiary pelderatis that I've ever seen."

Mitty smiled a faint, fleeting smile. "You are very kind. I really only dabble a bit."

Just then the cabin door burst open, and suddenly a lovely dark-haired girl was in Mitty's arms. "The meteors! The Jejoonians!" she said. "Will we make it?"

The pounding of the meteors increased; from behind the spaceship came the menacing pocketa-pocketa-pocketa of the new Jejoonian disintegrator cannons. Mitty looked down calmly at the girl. "Trust me," he said softly, his voice strong and warm. " 'Buck' Mitty will not fail you." As he released her, there was adoration in her eyes.

"Change course to sixteen hundred!" yelled Mitty abruptly, and just as abruptly the ship plunged, popping out of the meteor cloud and narrowly missing the supernova. The ship groaned under the strain as the engines screamed POCKETA—POCKETA—POCKETA. But the ship held together and the maneuver paid off. Mitty watched, a faint, fleeting smile playing about his lips, as the Jejoonian ship that had been chasing them plummeted deep into the heart of the supernova.

Cheers rose from the crewmen. The lovely dark-haired girl sighed passionately. Navigator MacMillan gave the "thumbs-up."

Suddenly another Jejoonian vessel appeared from behind a nearby planet. The slimy, six-armed brutes were going to board the Earth ship.

"Fools," said Mitty, and then, with a smile somewhat less faint than usual: "All right, men. Draw your swords...."

"Well?" said the man in a white coat.

"Still nothing," said another man in a white coat.

"It's a simple mathematical question," said the first man. "What's taking so long?"

"Don't know," said the second man. "Nothing's broken. Everything's functional. There's just no answer, no matter what I ask."

"That's just great," groaned the first man. "Now what do we tell the stockholders? 'Ladies and gentlemen, we now present the latest acquisition of the R.S. Walter Life Insurance Company: the all-new, one-of-a-kind, super-deluxe, fabulously expensive, completely and inexplicably useless MTV computer.' "

...Mitty thought briefly of printing out the story of his life. The world is not ready, he decided, and, with something approaching a grin, deftly sliced off the head of the first Jejoonian.

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Here is the sad story of Kenny Dorchester, a huge and unhappy 367 pounds, who learns that there are worse things than being fat...

The Monkey Treatment

BY
GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

Kenny Dorchester was a fat man.

He had not always been a fat man, of course. He had come into the world a perfectly normal infant of modest weight, but the normalcy was short-lived in Kenny's case, and before very long he had become a chubby-cheeked toddler well swaddled in baby fat. From then on it was all downhill and upscale so far as Kenny was concerned. He became a pudgy child, a corpulent adolescent, and a positively porcine college student, all in good turn, and by adulthood he had left all those intermediate steps behind and graduated into full obesity.

People become obese for a variety of complex reasons, some of them physiological. Kenny's reason was relatively simple: food. Kenny Dorchester loved to eat. Often he would paraphrase Will Rogers, winking broadly, and tell his friends that he had never met a food he didn't like. This was not precisely true, since Kenny loathed both liver and prune juice. Perhaps, if his mother had served them more often during his childhood, he would never have attained the girth and gravity that so haunted him at maturity. Unfortunately, Gina Dorchester was more inclined to lasagne and roast turkey with stuffing and sweet potatoes and chocolate pudding and veal cordon bleu and buttered corn-on-the-cob and stacks of blueberry pancakes (although not all in one meal) than she was to liver and prune juice, and once Kenny had expressed his preference in the matter by retching his liver back onto his plate, she obligingly never served liver and prune juice again.

Thus, all unknowing, she set her son on the soft, suety road to the mon-

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key treatment. But that was long ago, and the poor woman really cannot be blamed, since it was Kenny himself who ate his way there.

Kenny loved pepperoni pizza, or plain pizza, or garbage pizza with everything on it, including anchovies. Kenny could eat an entire slab of barbecued ribs, either beef or pork, and the spicier the sauce was, the more he approved. He was fond of rare prime rib and roast chicken and Rock Cornish game hens stuffed with rice, and he was hardly the sort to object to a nice sirloin or a platter of fried shrimp or a hunk of kielbasa. He liked his burgers with everything on them, and fries and onion rings on the side, please. There was nothing you could do to his friend the potato that would possibly turn him against it, but he was also partial to pasta and rice, to yams candied and un-, and even to mashed rutabagas.

"Desserts are my downfall," he would sometimes say, for he liked sweets of all varieties, especially devil's food cake and cannelloni and hot apple pie with cheese (Cheddar, please), or maybe cold strawberry pie with whipped cream. "Bread is my downfall," he would say at other times, when it seemed likely that no dessert was forthcoming, and so saying he would rip off another chunk of sourdough or butter up another crescent roll or reach for another slice of garlic bread, which was a particular vice.

Kenny had a lot of particular vices. He thought himself an authority on both fine restaurants and fast-food franchises, and could discourse endlessly and knowledgeably about either. He relished Greek food and Chinese food and Japanese food and Korean food and German food and Italian food and French food and Indian food, and was always on the lookout for new ethnic groups so he might "expand my cultural horizons." When Saigon fell, Kenny speculated about how many of the Vietnamese refugees would be likely to open restaurants. When Kenny traveled, he always made it a point to gorge himself on the area's specialty, and he could tell you the best places to eat in any of twenty-four major American cities, while reminiscing fondly about the meals he had enjoyed in each of them. His favorite writers were James Beard and Calvin Trillin.

"I live a tasty life!" Kenny Dorchester would proclaim, beaming. And so he did. But Kenny also had a secret. He did not often think of it and never spoke it, but it was there nonetheless, down at the heart of him beneath all those great rolls of flesh, and not all his sauces could drown it, nor could his trusty fork keep it at bay.

Kenny Dorchester did not *like* being fat.

Kenny was like a man torn between two lovers, for while he loved his food with an abiding passion, he also dreamed of other loves, of women, and he knew that in order to secure the one he would have to give up the other, and

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that knowledge was his secret pain. Often he wrestled with the dilemmas posed by his situation. It seemed to Kenny that while it might be preferable to be slender and have a woman than to be fat and have only a crawfish bisque, nonetheless the latter was not entirely to be spurned. Both were sources of happiness, after all, and the real misery fell to those who gave up the one and failed to obtain the other. Nothing depressed or saddened Kenny so much as the sight of a fat person eating cottage cheese. Such pathetic human beings never seemed to get appreciably skinnier, Kenny thought, and were doomed to go throught life bereft of both women and crawfish, a fate too grim to contemplate.

Yet despite all his misgivings, at times the secret pain inside Kenny Dorchester would flare up mightily, and fill him with a sense of resolve that made him feel as if anything might be possible. The sight of a particularly beautiful woman or the word of some new, painless, and wonderfully effective diet were particularly prone to trigger what Kenny thought of as his "aberrations." When such moods came, Kenny would be driven to diet.

Over the years he tried every diet there was, briefly and secretly. He tried Dr. Atkins's diet and Dr. Stillman's diet, the grapefruit diet and the brown rice diet. He tried the liquid protein diet, which was truly disgusting. He lived for a week on nothing but Slender and Sego, until he had run through all of the flavors and gotten bored. He joined a Pounds-Off club and attended a few meetings, until he discovered that the company of fellow dieters did him no good whatsoever, since all they talked about was food. He went on a hunger strike that lasted until he got hungry. He tried the fruit juice diet, and the drinking man's diet (even though he was not a drinking man), and the martinis-and-whipped-cream diet (he omitted the martinis).

A hypnotist told him that his favorite foods tasted bad and he wasn't hungry anyway, but it was a damned lie, and that was that for hypnosis. He had his behavior modified so he put down his fork between bites, used small plates that looked full even with tiny portions, and wrote down every thing he ate in a notebook. That left him with stacks of notebooks, a great many small dishes to wash, and unusual manual dexterity in putting down and picking up his fork. His favorite diet was the one that said you could eat all you wanted of your favorite food, so long as you ate nothing *but* that. The only problem was that Kenny couldn't decide what was really his one true favorite, so he wound up eating ribs for a week, and pizza for a week, and Peking duck for a week (that was an expensive week), and losing no weight whatsoever, although he did have a great time.

Most of Kenny Dorchester's aberrations lasted for a week or two. Then, like a man coming out of a fog, he

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would look around and realize that he was absolutely miserable, losing relatively little weight, and in imminent danger of turning into one of those cottage-cheese fatties he so pitied. At that point he would chuck the diet, go out for a good meal, and be restored to his normal self for another six months, until his secret pain surfaced again.

Then, one Friday night, he spied Henry Moroney at the Slab.

The Slab was Kenny's favorite barbecue joint. It specialized in ribs, charred and meaty and served dripping with a sauce that Kenny approved of mightily. And on Fridays the Slab offered all the ribs you could eat for only fifteen dollars, which was prohibitively high for most people but a bargain for Kenny, who could eat a great many ribs. On that particular Friday, Kenny had just finished his first slab and was waiting for the second, sipping beer and eating bread, when he chanced to look up and realized, with a start, that the slim, haggard fellow in the next booth was, in fact, Henry Moroney.

Kenny Dorchester was nonplussed. The last time he had seen Henry Moroney, they had both been unhappy Pounds-Off members, and Moroney had been the only one in the club who weighed more than Kenny did. A great fat whale of a man, Moroney had carried about the cruel nickname of "Boney," as he confessed to his fellow members. Only now the nickname seemed to fit. Not only was Moroney skinny enough to hint at a rib cage under his skin, but the table in front of him was absolutely littered with bones. That was the detail that intrigued Kenny Dorchester. All those bones. He began to count, and he lost track before very long, because all the bones were disordered, strewn about on empty plates in little puddles of drying sauce. But from the sheer mass of them it was clear that Moroney had put away at least four slabs of ribs, maybe five.

It seemed to Kenny Dorchester that Henry "Boney" Moroney knew the secret. If there were a way to lose hundreds of pounds and still be able to consume five slabs of ribs at a sitting, that was something Kenny desperately needed to know. So he rose and walked over to Moroney's booth and squeezed in opposite him. "It *is* you," he said.

Moroney looked up as if he hadn't noticed Kenny until that very second. "Oh," he said in a thin, tired voice. "You." He seemed very weary, but Kenny thought that was probably natural for someone who had lost so much weight. Moroney's eyes were sunk in deep gray hollows, his flesh sagged in pale, empty folds, and he was slouching forward with his elbows on the table as if he were too exhausted to sit up straight. He looked terrible, but he had lost so much *weight*....

"You look wonderful!" Kenny blurted. "How did you do it? How? You must tell me, Henry, really you must."

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"No," Moroney whispered. "No, Kenny. Go away."

Kenny was taken aback. "Really!" he declared. "That's not very friendly. I'm not leaving until I know your secret, Henry. You owe it to me. Think of all the times we've broken bread together."

"Oh, Kenny," Moroney said, in his faint and terrible voice. "Go, please, go, you don't want to know, it's too ... too...." He stopped in mid-sentence, and a spasm passed across his face. He moaned. His head twisted wildly to the side, as if he were having some kind of fit, and his hands beat on the table. "Oooooo," he said.

"Henry, what's wrong?" Kenny said, alarmed. He was certain now that Boney Moroney had overdone this diet.

"Ohhhh," Moroney sighed in sudden relief. "Nothing, nothing. I'm fine." His voice had none of the enthusiasm of his words. "I'm wonderful, in fact. Wonderful, Kenny. I haven't been so slim since ... since ... why, never. It's a miracle." He smiled faintly. "I'll be at my goal soon, and then it will be over. I think. Think I'll be at my goal. Don't know my weight, really." He put a hand to his brow. "I am slender, though, truly I am. Don't you think I look good?"

"Yes, yes," Kenny agreed impatiently. "But how? You must tell me. Surely not those Pounds-Off phonies...."

"No," said Moroney weakly. "No, it was the monkey treatment. Here, I'll write it down for you." He took out a pencil and scrawled an address on a napkin.

Kenny stuffed the napkin into a pocket. "The monkey treatment? I've never heard of that. What is it?"

Henry Moroney licked his lips. "They...." he started, and then another fit hit him, and his head twitched around grotesquely. "Go," he said to Kenny, "just go. It works, Kenny, yes, oh. The monkey treatment, yes. I can't say more. You have the address. Excuse me." He placed his hands flat on the table and pushed himself to his feet, then walked over to the cashier, shuffling like a man twice his age. Kenny Dorchester watched him go, and decided that Moroney had *definitely* overdone this monkey treatment, whatever it was. He had never had tics or spasms before, or whatever that had been.

"You have to have a sense of proportion about these things," Kenny said stoutly to himself. He patted his pocket to make sure the napkin was still there, resolved that he would handle things more sensibly than Boney Moroney, and returned to his own booth and his second slab of ribs. He ate four that night, figuring that if he was going to start a diet tomorrow he had better get in some eating while the eating was good.

The next day being Saturday, Kenny was free to pursue the monkey treatment and dream of a new, slender

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im. He rose early, and immediately ushed to the bathroom to weigh himelf on his digital scale, which he loved early because you didn't have to quint down at the numbers, since they it up nice and bright and precise in ed. This morning they lit up as 367. He had gained a few pounds, but he hardly minded. The monkey treatment would strip them off again soon nough.

Kenny tried to phone ahead, to ake sure this place was open on Satrday, but that proved to be impossible. Moroney had written nothing ut an address, and there was no diet enter at that listing in the Yellow ages, nor a health club, nor a doctor. enny looked in the white pages under Monkey," but that yielded nothing. o there was nothing to do but go own there in person.

Even that was troublesome. The ldress was way down by the docks in singularly unsavory neighborhood, d Kenny had a hard time getting a b to take him there. He finally got s way by threatening to report the bbie to the commissioner. Kenny orchester knew his rights.

Before long, though, he began to ve his doubts. The narrow little eets they wound through were filthy d decaying, altogether unappetizing, d it occurred to Kenny that any diet nter located down here might offer ly dangerous quackery. The block in estion was an old commercial strip ne to seed, and it put his hackles up even more. Half the stores were boarded closed, and the rest lurked behind filthy dark windows and iron gates. The cab pulled up in front of an absolutely miserable old brick storefront, flanked by two vacant lots full of rubble, its plate glass windows grimed over impenetrably. A faded Coca-Cola sign swung back and forth, groaning, above the door. But the number was the number that Boney Moroney had written down.

"Here you are," the cabbie said impatiently, as Kenny peered out the taxi window, aghast.

"This does not look correct," Kenny said. "I will investigate. Kindly wait here until I am certain this is the place."

The cabbie nodded, and Kenny slid over and levered himself out of the taxi. He had taken two steps when he heard the cab shift gears and pull away from the curb, screeching. He turned and watched in astonishment. "Here, you can't...." he began. But it did. He would most definitely report that man to the commissioner, he decided.

But meanwhile he was stranded down here, and it seemed foolish not to proceed when he had come this far. Whether he took the monkey treatment or not, no doubt they would let him use a phone to summon another cab. Kenny screwed up his resolution, and went on into the grimy, unmarked storefront. A bell tinkled as he opened the door.

It was dark inside. The dust and

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dirt on the windows kept out nearly all the sunlight, and it took a moment for Kenny's eyes to adjust. When they did, he saw to his horror that he had walked into someone's living room. One of those gypsy families that moved into abandoned stores, he thought. He was standing on a threadbare carpet, and around and about him was a scatter of old furniture, no doubt the best the Salvation Army had to offer. An ancient black-and-white TV set crouched in one corner, staring at him blindly. The room stank of urine. "Sorry," Kenny muttered feebly, terrified that some dark gypsy youth would come out of the shadows to knife him. "Sorry." He had stepped backward, groping behind him for the doorknob, when the man came out of the back room.

"Ah!" the man said, spying Kenny at once from tiny bright eyes. "Ah, the monkey treatment!" He rubbed his hands together and grinned. Kenny was terrified. The man was the fattest, grossest human being that Kenny had ever laid eyes on. He had squeezed through the door sideways. He was fatter than Kenny, fatter than Boney Moroney. He literally dripped with fat. And he was repulsive in other ways as well. He had the complexion of a mushroom, and minuscule little eyes almost invisible amid rolls of pale flesh. His corpulence seemed to have overwhelmed even his hair, of which he had very little. Barechested, he displayed vast areas of folded, bulging skin, and his huge breasts flopped as he came forward quickly and seized Kenny by the arm. "The monkey treatment!" he repeated eagerly, pulling Kenny forward. Kenny looked at him, in shock, and was struck dumb by his grin. When the man grinned, his mouth seemed to become half of his face, a grotesque semicircle full of shining white teeth.

"No," Kenny said at last, "no, I have changed my mind." Boney Moroney or no, he didn't think he cared to try this monkey treatment if it was administered by such as this. In the first place, it clearly could not be very effective, or else the man would not be so monstrously obese. Besides, it was probably dangerous, some quack potion of monkey hormones or something like that. "*NO!*" Kenny repeated more forcefully, trying to wrest his arm free from the grasp of the grotesquerie who held it.

But it was useless. The man was distinctly larger and infinitely stronger than Kenny, and he propelled him across the room with ease, oblivious to Kenny's protests, grinning like a maniac all the while. "Fat man," he burbled, and as if to prove his point he reached out and seized one of Kenny's bulges and twisted it painfully. "Fat, fat, fat no good. Monkey treatment make you thin."

"Yes, but...."

"Monkey treatment," the man repeated, and somehow he had gotten behind Kenny. He put his weight again

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Kenny's back and pushed, and Kenny staggered through a curtained doorway into the back room. The smell of urine was much stronger in there, strong enough to make him want to retch. It was pitch black, and from all sides Kenny heard rustlings and scurryings in the darkness. *Rats,* he thought wildly. Kenny was deathly afraid of rats. He fumbled about and propelled himself toward the square dim light that marked the curtain he had come through.

Before he was quite there, a high-pitched chittering sounded suddenly from behind him, sharp and rapid as fire from a machine gun. Then another voice took it up, then a third, and suddenly the dark was alive with the terrible hammering noise. Kenny put his hands over his ears and staggered through the curtain, but just as he emerged he felt something brush the back of his neck, something warm and hairy. "Aieeee!" he screamed, dancing out into the front room where the tremendous bare-chested madman was waiting patiently. Kenny hopped from one foot to the other, screeching, "Aieeee, a rat, a rat on my back. Get it off, get it *off!*" He was trying to grab for it with both hands, but the thing was very quick, and shifted around so cleverly that he couldn't get ahold of it. But he felt it there, alive, moving. "Help me, help me!" he called out. "A rat!"

The proprietor grinned at him and shook his head, so all his many chins went bobbing merrily. "No, no," he said. "No rat, fat man. Monkey. You get the monkey treatment." Then he stepped forward and seized Kenny by the elbow again, and drew him over to a full-length mirror mounted on the wall. It was so dim in the room that Kenny could scarcely make out anything in the mirror, except that it wasn't wide enough and chopped off both his arms. The man stepped back and yanked a pull-cord dangling from the ceiling, and a single bare lightbulb clicked on overhead. The bulb swung back and forth, back and forth, so the light shifted crazily. Kenny Dorchester trembled and stared at the mirror.

"Oh," he said.

There was a monkey on his back.

Actually it was on his shoulders, its legs wrapped around his thick neck and twined together beneath his triple chin. He could feel its monkey hair scratching the back of his neck, could feel its warm little monkey paws lightly grasping his ears. It was a very tiny monkey. As Kenny looked into the mirror, he saw it peek out from behind his head, grinning hugely. It had quick darting eyes, coarse brown hair, and altogether too many shiny white teeth for Kenny's liking. Its long prehensile tail swayed about restlessly, like some hairy snake that had grown out of the back of Kenny's skull.

Kenny's heart was pounding away like some great air hammer lodged in his chest, and he was altogether distressed by this place, this man, and this

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monkey, but he gathered all his reserves and forced himself to be calm. It wasn't a rat, after all. The little monkey couldn't harm him. It had to be a trained monkey, the way it had perched on his shoulders. Its owner must let it ride around like this, and when Kenny had come unwillingly through that curtain, it had probably mistaken him. All fat men look alike in the dark.

Kenny grabbed behind him and tried to pull the monkey loose, but somehow he couldn't seem to get a grip on it. The mirror, reversing everything, just made it worse. He jumped up and down ponderously, shaking the entire room and making the furniture leap around every time he landed, but the monkey held on tight to his ears and could not be dislodged.

Finally, with what Kenny thought was incredible aplomb under the circumstances, he turned to the gross proprietor and said, "Your monkey, sir. Kindly help me remove it."

"No, no," the man said. "Make you skinny. Monkey treatment. You no want to be skinny?"

"Of course I do," Kenny said unhappily, "but this is absurd." He was confused. This monkey on his back seemed to be part of the monkey treatment, but that certainly didn't make very much sense.

"Go," the man said. He reached up and snapped off the light with a sharp tug that sent the bulb careening wildly again. Then he started toward Kenny, who backpedaled nervously. "Go," the man repeated, as he grabbed Kenny's arm again. "Out, out. You get monkey treatment, you go now."

"See here!" Kenny said furiously. "Let go of me! Get this monkey off me, do you hear? I don't want your monkey! Do you hear me? Quit pushing, sir! I tell you, I have friends with the police department, you aren't going to get away with this. Here now...."

But all his protestations were useless. The man was a veritable tidal wave of sweating, smelling pale flesh, and he put his weight against Kenny and propelled him helplessly toward the door. The bell rang again as he pulled it open and shoved Kenny out into the garish bright sunlight.

"I'm not going to pay for this!" Kenny said stoutly, staggering. "Not a cent, do you hear!"

"No charge for monkey treatment," the man said, grinning.

"At least let me call a cab," Kenny began, but it was too late, the man had closed the door. Kenny stepped forward angrily and tried to yank it back open, but it did not budge. Locked. "Open up in there!" Kenny demanded at the top of his lungs. There was no reply. He shouted again, and grew suddenly and uncomfortably aware that he was being stared at. Kenny turned around. Across the street three old winos were sitting on the stoop of a boarded-up store, passing a bottle in a brown paper bag and regarding him through wary eyes.

That was when Kenny Dorchester

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recalled that he was standing there in the street in broad daylight with a monkey on his back.

A flush crept up his neck and spread across his cheeks. He felt very silly. "A pet!" he shouted to the winos, forcing a smile. "Just my little pet!" They went on staring. Kenny gave a last angry look at the locked door, and set off down the street, his legs pumping furiously. He had to get to someplace private.

Rounding the corner, he came upon a dark, narrow alley behind two gray old tenement buildings, and ducked inside, wheezing for breath. He sat down heavily on a trash can, pulled out his handkerchief, and mopped his brow. The monkey shifted just a bit, and Kenny felt it move. "Off me!" he shouted, reaching up and back again to try to wrench it off by the scruff of its neck, only to have it elude him once more. He tucked away his handkerchief and groped behind his head with both hands, but he just couldn't get ahold of it. Finally, exhausted, he stopped, and tried to think.

The legs! he thought. The legs under his chins! That's the ticket! Very calmly and deliberately, he reached up, felt for the monkey's legs, and wrapped one big fleshy hand around each of them. He took a deep breath and then savagely tried to yank them apart, as if they were two ends of a giant wishbone.

The monkey attacked him.

One hand twisted his right ear painfully, until it felt like it was being pulled clean off his head. The other started hammering against his temple, beating a furious tattoo. Kenny Dorchester yelped in distress and let go of the monkey's legs — which he hadn't budged for all his efforts. The monkey quit beating on him and released his ear. Kenny sobbed, half with relief and half with frustration. He felt wretched.

He sat there in that filthy alley for ages, defeated in his efforts to remove the monkey and afraid to go back to the street where people would point at him and laugh, or make rude, insulting comments under their breath. It was difficult enough going through life as a fat man, Kenny thought. How much worse, then, to face the cruel world as a fat man with a monkey on his back. Kenny did not want to know. He resolved to sit there on that trash can in the dark alley until he died or the monkey died, rather than face shame and ridicule on the streets.

His resolve endured about an hour. Then Kenny Dorchester began to get hungry. Maybe people would laugh at him, but they had always laughed at him, so what did it matter? Kenny rose and dusted himself off, while the monkey settled itself more comfortably on his neck. He ignored it, and decided to go in search of a pepperoni pizza.

He did not find one easily. The abysmal slum in which he had been stranded had a surfeit of winos, dangerous-looking teenagers, and burned-out or boarded-up buildings, but it had

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precious few pizza parlors. Nor did it have any taxis. Kenny walked down the main thoroughfare with brisk dignity, looking neither left nor right, heading for safer neighborhoods as fast as his plump little legs could carry him. Twice he came upon phone booths, and eagerly fetched out a coin to summon transportation, but both times the phones proved to be out of order. Vandals, thought Kenny Dorchester, were as bad as rats.

Finally, after what seemed like hours of walking, he stumbled upon a sleazy café. The lettering on the window said JOHN'S GRILL, and there was a neon sign above the door that said, simply, EAT. Kenny was very familiar with those three lovely letters, and he recognized the sign two blocks off. It called to him like a beacon. Even before he entered, he knew it was rather unlikely that such a place would include pepperoni pizza on its menu, but by that time Kenny had ceased to care.

As he pushed the door aside, Kenny experienced a brief moment of apprehension, partially because he felt very out of place in the café, where the rest of the diners all appeared to be muggers, and partially because he was afraid they would refuse to serve him because of the monkey on his back. Acutely uncomfortable in the doorway, he moved quickly to a small table in an obscure corner, where he hoped to escape the curious stares. A gaunt gray-haired waitress in a faded pink uniform moved purposefully toward him, and Kenny sat with his eyes downcast, playing nervously with the salt, pepper, ketchup, dreading the moment when she arrived and said, "Hey, you can't bring that thing in here!"

But when the waitress reached his table, she simply pulled a pad out of her apron pocket and stood poised, pencil in hand. "Well?" she demanded. "What'll it be?"

Kenny stared up in shock, and smiled. He stammered a bit, then recovered himself and ordered a cheese omelet with a double side of bacon, coffee and a large glass of milk, and cinnamon toast. "Do hash browns come with?" he asked hopefully, but the waitress shook her head and departed.

What a marvelous, kind woman, Kenny thought as he waited for his meal and shredded a paper napkin thoughtfully. What a wonderful place! Why, they hadn't even mentioned his monkey! How very polite of them.

The food arrived shortly. "Ahhhh," Kenny said as the waitress laid it out in front of him on the Formica tabletop. He was ravenous. He selected a slice of cinnamon toast, and brought it to his mouth.

And a little monkey darted out from behind his head and snatched it clean away.

Kenny Dorchester sat in numb surprise for an instant, his suddenly empty hand poised before his open mouth. He heard the monkey eating his toast,

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chomping noisily. Then, before Kenny had quite comprehended what was happening, the monkey's great long tail snaked in under his armpit, curled around his glass of milk, and spirited it up and away in the blink of an eye.

"*Hey!*" Kenny said, but he was much too slow. Behind his back he heard slurping, sucking sounds, and all of a sudden the glass came vaulting over his left shoulder. He caught it before it fell and smashed, and set it down unsteadily. The monkey's tail came stealthily around and headed for his bacon. Kenny grabbed up a fork and stabbed at it, but the monkey was faster than he was. The bacon vanished, and the tines of the fork bent against the hard Formica uselessly.

By then Kenny knew he was in a race. Dropping the bent fork, he used his spoon to cut off a chunk of the omelet, dripping cheese, and he bent forward as he lifted it, quick as he could. The monkey was quicker. A little hand flashed in from somewhere, and the spoon had only a tantalizing gob of half-melted cheese remaining on it when it reached Kenny's mouth. He lunged back toward his plate, and loaded up again, but it didn't matter how fast he tried to be. The monkey had two paws and a tail, and once it even used a little monkey foot to snatch something away from him. In hardly any time at all, Kenny Dorchester's meal was gone. He sat there staring down at the empty, greasy plate, and he felt tears gathering in his eyes.

The waitress reappeared without Kenny noticing. "My, you sure are a hungry one," she said to him, ripping off his check from her pad and putting it in front of him. "Polished that off quicker than anyone I ever saw."

Kenny looked up at her. "But I *didn't*," he protested. "The monkey ate it all!"

The waitress looked at him very oddly. "The monkey?" she said, uncertainly.

"The monkey," Kenny said. He did not care for the way she was staring at him, like he was crazy or something.

"What monkey?" she asked. "You didn't sneak no animals in here, did you? The board of health don't allow no animals in here, mister."

"What do you mean, *sneak?*" Kenny said in annoyance. "Why, the monkey is right on my—" He never got a chance to finish. Just then the monkey hit him, a tremendous hard blow on the left side of his face. The force of it twisted his head half-around, and Kenny yelped in pain and shock.

The waitress seemed concerned. "You OK, mister?" she asked. "You ain't gonna have a fit, are you, twitching like that?"

"*I didn't twitch!*" Kenny all but shouted. "The goddamned monkey hit me! Can't you see?"

"Oh," said the waitress, taking a step backward. "Oh, of course. Your monkey hit you. Pesky little things, ain't they?"

Kenny pounded his fists on the table

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in frustration. "Never mind," he said, "just never mind." He snatched up the check — the monkey did not take that away from him, he noted — and rose. "Here," he said, pulling out his wallet. "And you have a phone in this place, don't you? Call me a cab, all right? You can do that, can't you?"

"Sure," the waitress said, moving to the register to ring up his meal. Everyone in the café was staring at him. "Sure, mister," she muttered. "A cab. We'll get you a cab right away."

Kenny waited, fuming. The cab driver made no comment on his monkey. Instead of going home, he took the cab to his favorite pizza place, three blocks from his apartment. Then he stormed right in and ordered a large pepperoni. The monkey ate it all, even when Kenny tried to confuse it by picking up one slice in each hand and moving them simultaneously toward his mouth. Unfortunately, the monkey had two hands as well, both of them faster than Kenny's.

When the pizza was completely gone, Kenny thought for a moment, summoned over the waitress, and ordered a second. This time he got a large anchovy. He thought that was very clever. Kenny Dorchester had never met anyone else beside himself who liked anchovy pizza. Those little salty fishes would be his salvation, he thought. To increase the odds, when the pizza arrived Kenny picked up the hot pepper shaker and covered it with enough hot peppers to ignite a major conflagration. Then, feeling confident, he tried to eat a slice.

The monkey liked anchovy pizza with lots of hot peppers. Kenny Dorchester almost wept.

He went from the pizza place to the Slab, from the Slab to a fine Greek restaurant, from the Greek restaurant to a local McDonald's, from McDonald's to a bakery that made the most marvelous chocolate éclairs. Sooner or later, Kenny Dorchester thought, the monkey would be full. It was only a very little monkey, after all. How much food could it eat? He would just keep on ordering food, he resolved, and the monkey would either reach its limits or rupture and die.

That day Kenny spent more than two hundred dollars on meals.

He got absolutely nothing to eat.

The monkey seemed to be a bottomless pit. If it had a capacity, that capacity was surely greater than the capacity of Kenny's wallet. Finally he was forced to admit defeat. The monkey could not be stuffed into submission.

Kenny cast about for another tactic, and finally hit on it. Monkeys were stupid, after all, even invisible monkeys with prodigious appetites. Smiling slyly, Kenny went to a neighborhood supermarket, and picked up a box of banana pudding (it seemed appropriate) and a box of rat poison. Humming a spry little tune, he walked on home, and set to work making the pudding, stirring in liberal amounts of

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the rat poison as it cooked. The poison was nicely odorless. The pudding smelled wonderful. Kenny poured it into some dessert cups to cool, and watched television for an hour or so. Finally he rose nonchalantly, went to the refrigerator, and got out a pudding and a nice big spoon. He sat back down in front of the set, spooned up a generous glob of pudding, and brought it to his open mouth. Where he paused. And paused. And waited.

The monkey did nothing.

Maybe it was full at last, Kenny thought. He put aside the poisoned pudding and rushed back to his kitchen, where he found a box of vanilla wafers hiding on a shelf, and few forlorn Fig Newtons as well.

The monkey ate all of them.

A tear trickled down Kenny's cheek. The monkey would let him have all the poisoned pudding he wanted, it seemed, but nothing else. He reached back halfheartedly and tried to grab the monkey once again, thinking maybe all that eating would have slowed it down some, but it was a vain hope. The monkey evaded him, and when Kenny persisted the monkey bit his finger. Kenny yowled and snatched his hand back. His finger was bleeding. He sucked on it. That much, at least, the monkey permitted him.

When he had washed his finger and wrapped a Band-Aid around it, Kenny returned to his living room and seated himself heavily, weary and defeated, in front of his television set. An old rerun of "The Galloping Gourmet" was coming on. He couldn't stand it. He jabbed at his remote control to change the channel, and watched blindly for hours, sunk in despair, weeping at the Betty Crocker commercials. Finally, during the late late show, he stirred a little at one of the frequent public service announcements. That was it, he thought; he had to enlist others, he had to get help.

He picked up his phone and punched out the Crisis Line number.

The woman who answered sounded kind and sympathetic and very beautiful, and Kenny began to pour out his heart to her, all about the monkey that wouldn't let him eat, about how nobody else seemed to notice the monkey, about ... but he had barely gotten his heart-pouring going good when the monkey smashed him across the side of the head. Kenny moaned. "What's wrong?" the woman asked. The monkey yanked his ear. Kenny tried to ignore the pain and keep on talking, but the monkey kept hurting him until finally he shuddered and sobbed and hung up the phone.

This is a nightmare, Kenny thought, a terrible nightmare. And so thinking, he pushed himself to his feet and staggered off to bed, hoping that everything would be normal in the morning, that the monkey would have been nothing but part of some wretched dream, no doubt brought on by indigestion.

The merciless little monkey would

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not even allow him to sleep properly, Kenny discovered. He was accustomed to sleeping on his back, with his hands folded very primly on his stomach. But when he undressed and tried to assume that position, the monkey fists came raining down on his poor head like some furious hairy hail. The monkey was not about to be squashed between Kenny's bulk and the pillows, it seemed. Kenny sqealed with pain and rolled over on his stomach. He was very uncomfortable this way and had difficulty falling asleep, but it was the only way the monkey would leave him alone.

The next morning Kenny Dorchester drifted slowly into wakefulness, his cheek mashed against the pillows and his right arm still asleep. He was afraid to move. It was all a dream, he told himself, there is no monkey — what a silly thing that would be, monkey indeed! — it was only that Boney Moroney had told him about this "monkey treatment," and he had slept on it and had a nightmare. He couldn't feel anything on his back, not a thing. This was just like any other morning. He opened one bleary eye. His bedroom looked perfectly normal. Still he was afraid to move. It was very peaceful lying here like this, monkeyless, and he wanted to savor this feeling. So Kenny lay very still for the longest time, watching the numbers on his digital clock change slowly.

Then his stomach growled at him. It was very upset. Kenny gathered up his courage. "There is no monkey!" he proclaimed loudly, and he sat up in bed.

He felt the monkey shift.

Kenny trembled and almost started to weep again, but he controlled himself with an effort. No monkey was going to get the best of Kenny Dorchester, he told himself. Grimacing, he donned his slippers and plodded into the bathroom.

The monkey peered out cautiously from behind his head while Kenny was shaving. He glared at it in the bathroom mirror. It seemed to have grown a bit, but that was hardly surprising, considering how much it had eaten yesterday. Kenny toyed with the idea of trying to cut the monkey's throat, but decided that his Norelco electric shaver was not terribly well suited to that end. And even if he used a knife, trying to stab behind his own back while looking in the mirror was a dangerously uncertain proposition.

Before leaving the bathroom, Kenny was struck by a whim. He stepped on his scale.

The numbers lit up at once: 367. The same as yesterday, he thought. The monkey weighed nothing. He frowned. No, that had to be wrong. No doubt the little monkey weighed a pound or two, but its weight was offset by whatever poundage Kenny had lost. He had to have lost *some* weight, he reasoned, since he hadn't been al-

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lowed to eat anything for ever so long. He stepped off the scale, then got back on quickly, just to double-check. It still read 367. Kenny was certain that he had lost weight. Perhaps some good would come of his travails after all. The thought made him feel oddly cheerful.

Kenny grew even more cheerful at breakfast. For the first time since he had gotten his monkey, he managed to get some food in his mouth.

When he arrived at the kitchen, he debated between French toast and bacon and eggs, but only briefly. Then he decided that he would never get to taste either. Instead, with a somber fatalism, Kenny fetched down a bowl and filled it with corn flakes and milk. The monkey would probably steal it all anyway, he thought, so there was no sense going to any trouble.

Quick as he could, he hurried the spoon to his mouth. The monkey grabbed it away. Kenny had expected it, had known it would happen, but when the monkey hand wrenched the spoon away he nonetheless felt a sudden and terrible grief. "No," he said uselessly. "No, no, no." He could hear the corn flakes crunching in that filthy monkey mouth, and he felt milk dripping down the back of his neck. Tears gathered in his eyes as he stared down at the bowl of corn flakes, so near and yet so far.

Then he had an idea.

Kenny Dorchester lunged forward and stuck his face right down in the bowl.

The monkey twisted his ear and shrieked and pounded on his temple, but Kenny didn't care. He was sucking in milk gleefully and gobbling up as many corn flakes as his mouth could hold. By the time the monkey's tail lashed around angrily and sent the bowl sailing from the table to shatter on the floor, Kenny had a huge wet mouthful. His cheeks bulged and milk dribbled down his chin, and somehow he'd gotten a corn flake up his right nostril, but Kenny was in heaven. He chewed and swallowed as fast as he could, almost choking on the food.

When it was all gone he licked his lips and rose triumphantly. "Ha, ha, ha." He walked back to his bedroom with great dignity and dressed, sneering at the monkey in the full-length bedroom mirror. He had beaten it.

In the days and weeks that followed, Kenny Dorchester settled into a new sort of daily routine and an uneasy accommodation with his monkey. It proved easier than Kenny might have imagined, except at mealtimes. When he was not attempting to get food into his mouth, it was almost possible to forget about the monkey entirely. At work it sat peacefully on his back while Kenny shuffled his papers and made his phone calls. His coworkers either failed to notice his monkey or were sufficiently polite so as not to comment on it. The only difficulty came one day at coffee break, when Kenny foolhardily approached the coffee vendor in an effort to secure a

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cheese Danish. The monkey ate nine of them before Kenny could stagger away, and the man insisted that Kenny had done it when his back was turned.

Simply by avoiding mirrors, a habit that Kenny Dorchester now began to cultivate as assiduously as any vampire, he was able to keep his mind off the monkey for most of the day. He had only one difficulty, though it occurred thrice daily: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. At those times the monkey asserted itself forcefully, and Kenny was forced to deal with it. As the weeks passed, he gradually fell into the habit of ordering food that could be served in bowls, so that he might practice what he termed his "Kellogg maneuver." By this strategem, Kenny usually managed to get at least a few mouthfuls to eat each and every day.

To be sure, there *were* problems. People would stare at him rather strangely when he used the Kellogg maneuver in public, and sometimes make rude comments on his table manners. At a chili emporium Kenny liked to frequent, the proprietor assumed he had suffered a heart attack when Kenny dove toward his chili, and was very angry with him afterward. On another occasion a bowl of soup left him with facial burns that made it look as though he were constantly blushing. And the last straw came when he was thrown bodily out of his favorite seafood restaurant in the world, simply because he plunged his face into a bowl of crawfish bisque and began sucking it up noisily. Kenny stood in the street and berated them loudly and forcefully, reminding them how much money he had spent there over the years. Thereafter he ate only at home.

Despite the limited success of his Kellogg maneuver, Kenny Dorchester still lost nine-tenths of every meal to the voracious monkey on his back. At first he was constantly hungry, frequently depressed, and full of schemes for ridding himself of his monkey. The only problem with these schemes was that none of them seemed to work. One Saturday, Kenny went to the monkey house at the zoo, hoping that his monkey might hop off to play with others of its kind, or perhaps go in pursuit of some attractive monkey of the opposite sex. Instead, no sooner had he entered the monkey house than all the monkeys imprisoned therein ran to the bars of their cages and began to chitter and scream and spit and leap up and down madly. His own monkey answered in kind, and when some of the caged monkeys began to throw peanut husks and other bits of garbage Kenny clapped his hands over his ears and fled.

On another occasion he allowed himself to visit a local saloon, and ordered a number of boilermakers, a drink he understood to be particularly devastating. His intent was to get his monkey so blind-drunk that it might be easily removed. This experiment, too, had rather unfortunate consequences. The monkey drank the boilermakers as

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fast as Kenny could order them, but after the third one it began to keep time to the disco music from the jukebox by beating on the top of Kenny's head. The next morning it was Kenny who woke with the pounding headache; the monkey seemed fine.

After a time, Kenny finally put all his scheming aside. Failure had discouraged him, and moreover the matter seemed somehow less urgent than it had originally. He was seldom hungry after the first week, in fact. Instead he went through a brief period of weakness, marked by frequent dizzy spells, and then a kind of euphoria settled over him. He felt just wonderful, and even better, he was losing weight!

To be sure, it did not show on his scale. Every morning he climbed up on it, and every morning it lit up as 367. But that was only because it was weighing the monkey as well as himself. Kenny knew he was losing; he could almost feel the pounds and inches just melting away, and some of his co-workers in the office remarked on it as well. Kenny owned up to it, beaming. When they asked him how he was doing it, he winked and replied, "The monkey treatment! The mysterious monkey treatment!" He said no more than that. The one time he tried to explain, the monkey fetched him such a wallop it almost took his head off, and Kenny's friends began to mutter about his strange spasms.

Finally the day came when Kenny had to tell his cleaner to take in all his pants a few inches. That was one of the most delightful tasks of his life, he thought.

All the pleasure went right out of the moment when he exited the store, however, and chanced to glance briefly to his side and see his reflection in the window. At home Kenny had long since removed all his mirrors, so he was shocked at the sight of his monkey. It had grown. It was a little thing no longer. Now it hunched on his back like some evil deformed chimpanzee, and its grinning face loomed above his head instead of peering out behind it. The monkey was grossly fat beneath its sparse brown hair, almost as wide as it was tall, and its great long tail drooped all the way to the ground. Kenny stared at it with horror, and it grinned back at him. No wonder he had been having backaches recently, he thought.

He walked home slowly, all the jauntiness gone out of his step, trying to think. A few neighborhood dogs followed him up the street, barking at his monkey. Kenny ignored them. He had long since learned that dogs could see his monkey, just like the monkeys at the zoo. He suspected that drunks could see it as well. One man had stared at him for a very long time that night he had visited the saloon. Of course, the fellow might just have been staring at those vanishing boilermakers.

Back in his apartment Kenny Dorchester stretched out on his couch on

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his stomach, stuck a pillow underneath his chin, and turned on his television set. He paid no attention to the screen, however. He was trying to figure things out. Even the Pizza Hut commercials were insufficiently distracting, although Kenny did absently mutter "Ah-h-h-h" like you were supposed to when the slice of pizza, dripping long strands of cheese, was first lifted from the pan.

When the show ended, Kenny got up and turned off the set and sat himself down at his dining room table. He found a piece of paper and a stubby little pencil. Very carefully, he block-printed a formula across the paper, and stared at it.

ME + MONKEY = 367 POUNDS

There were certain disturbing implications in that formula, Kenny thought. The more he considered them, the less he liked them. He was definitely losing weight, to be sure, and that was not to be sneered at — nonetheless, the grim inflexibility of the formula hinted that most of the gains traditionally attributed to weight loss would never be his to enjoy. No matter how much fat he shed, he would continue to carry around 367 pounds, and the strain on his body would be the same. As for becoming svelte and dashing and attractive to women, how could he even consider it so long as he had his monkey? Kenny thought of how a dinner date might go for him, and shuddered. "Where will it all end?" he said aloud.

The monkey shifted, and snickered a vile little snicker.

Kenny pursed his lips in firm disapproval. This could not go on, he resolved. He decided to go straight to the source on the morrow, and with that idea planted firmly in his mind, he took himself to bed.

The next day, after work, Kenny Dorchester returned by cab to the seedy neighborhood where he had been subjected to the monkey treatment.

The storefront was gone.

Kenny sat in the back seat of the taxi (this time he had the good sense not to get out, and moreover had tipped the driver handsomely in advance) and blinked in confusion. A tiny wet blubbery moan escaped his lips. The address was right, he knew it, he still had the slip of paper that had brought him there in the first place. But where he had found a grimy brick storefront adorned by a faded Coca-Cola sign and flanked by two vacants lots, now there was only one large vacant lot, choked with weeds and rubbish and broken bricks. "Oh, no," Kenny said. "Oh, no."

"You O.K.?" asked the lady driving the cab.

"Yes," Kenny muttered. "Just ... just wait, please. I have to think." He held his head in his hands. He feared he was going to develop a splitting headache. Suddenly he felt weak and dizzy. And very hungry. The meter ticked. The cabbie whistled. Kenny

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thought. The street looked just as he remembered it, except for the missing storefront. It was just as dirty, the old winos were still on their stoop, the....

Kenny rolled down the window. "You, sir!" he called out to one of the winos. The man stared at him. "Come here, sir!" Kenny yelled.

Warily, the old man shuffled across the street.

Kenny fetched out a dollar bill from his wallet and pressed it into the man's hand.. "Here, friend," he said, "Go and buy yourself some vintage Thunderbird, if you will."

"Why you givin' me this?" the wino said suspiciously.

"I wish you to answer me a question. What has become of the building that was standing there." — Kenny pointed — "a few weeks ago."

The man stuffed the dollar into his pocket quickly. "Ain't been no buildin' there fo' years," he said.

"I was afraid of that," Kenny said. "Are you certain? I was here in the not-so-distant past and I *distinctly* recall..."

"No buildin'," the wino said firmly. He turned and walked away, but after a few steps he paused and glanced back. "You're one of them fat guys," he said accusingly.

"What do you know about ... ahem ... overweight men?"

"See 'em wanderin' round over there, all the time. Crazy, too. Yellin' at thin air, playin' with some kind of animals. Yeah. I 'member you. You're one of them fat guys, all right." He scowled at Kenny, confused. "Looks like you lost some of that blubber, though. Real good. Thanks for the dollar."

Kenny Dorchester watched him return to his stoop and begin conversing animatedly with his colleagues. With a tremulous sigh, Kenny rolled up the window, glanced at the empty lot again, and bid his driver take him home. Him and his monkey, that is.

Weeks went dripping by and Kenny Dorchester lived as if in a trance. He went to work, shuffled his papers, mumbled pleasantries to his co-workers, struggled and schemed for his meager mouthfuls of food, avoided mirrors. The scale read 367. His flesh melted away from him at a precipitous rate. He developed slack, droopy jowls, and his skin sagged all about his middle, looking as flaccid and pitiful as a used condom. He began to have fainting spells, brought on by hunger. At times he staggered and lurched about the street, his thinning and weakened legs unable to support the weight of his growing monkey. His vision got blurry.

Once he even thought that his hair had started to fall out, but that at least was a false alarm; it was the monkey who was losing hair, thank goodness. It shed all over the place, ruining his furniture, and even daily vacuuming didn't seem to help much. Soon Kenny stopped trying to clean up. He lacked the energy. He lacked the energy for

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just about everything, in fact. Rising from a chair was a major undertaking. Cooking dinner was impossible torment — but he did *that* anyway, since the monkey beat him severely when it was not fed. Nothing seemed to matter very much to Kenny Dorchester. Nothing but the terrible tale of his scale each morning, and the formula that he had scotch-taped to his bathroom wall.

ME + MONKEY = 367 POUNDS

He wondered how much was ME anymore, and how much was MONKEY, but he did not really want to find out. One day, following the dictates of a kind of feeble whim, Kenny made a sudden grab for the monkey's legs under his chin, hoping against hope that it had gotten slow and obese and that he would be able to yank it from his back. His hands closed on nothing. On his own pale flesh. The monkey's legs did not seem to be there, though Kenny could still feel its awful crushing weight. He patted his neck and breast in dim confusion, staring down at himself, and noting absently that he could see his feet. He wondered how long that had been true. They seemed to be perfectly nice feet, Kenny Dorchester thought, although the legs to which they were attached were alarmingly gaunt.

Slowly his mind wandered back to the quandary at hand — what had become of the monkey's hind legs? Kenny frowned and puzzled and tried to work it all out in his head, but nothing occurred to him. Finally he slid his newly-discovered feet into a pair of bedroom slippers and shuffled to the closet were he had stored all of his mirrors. Closing his eyes, he reached in, fumbled about, and found the full-length mirror that had once hung on his bedroom wall. It was a large, wide mirror. Working entirely by touch, Kenny fetched it out, carried it a few feet, and painstakingly propped it up against a wall. Then he held his breath and opened his eyes.

There in the mirror stood a gaunt, gray, skeletal-looking fellow, hunched over and sickly. On his back, grinning, was a thing the size of a gorilla. A very obese gorilla. It had a long, pale, snakelike tail, and great long arms, and it was as white as a maggot and entirely hairless. It had no legs. It was ... attached to him now, growing right out of his back. Its grin was terrible, and filled up half of its face. It looked very like the gross proprietor of the monkey treatment emporium, in fact. Why had he never noticed that before? Of course, of course.

Kenny Dorchester turned from the mirror, and cooked the monkey a big rich dinner before going to bed.

That night he dreamed of how it all started, back in the Slab when he had met Boney Moroney. In his nightmare a great evil white thing rode atop Moroney's shoulders, eating slab after slab of ribs, but Kenny politely pretended not to notice while he and Boney made bright, spritely conversation. Then the thing ran out of ribs, so

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it reached down and lifted one of Boney's arms and began to eat his hand. The bones crunched nicely, and Moroney kept right on talking. The creature had eaten its way up to the elbow when Kenny woke screaming, covered with a cold sweat. He had wet his bed, too.

Agonizingly, he pushed himself up and staggered to the toilet, where he dry-heaved for ten minutes. The monkey, angry at being wakened, gave him a desultory slap from time to time.

And then a furtive light came into Kenny Dorchester's eyes. "Boney," he whispered. Hurriedly, he scrambled back to his bedroom on hands and knees, rose, and threw on some clothes. It was three in the morning, but Kenny knew there was no time to waste. He looked up an address in his phone book, and called a cab.

Boney Moroney lived in a tall, modern high-rise by the river, with moonlight shining brightly off its silver-mirrored flanks. When Kenny staggered in, he found the night doorman asleep at his station, which was just as well. Kenny tiptoed past him to the elevators and rode up to the eighth floor. The monkey on his back had begun stirring now, and seemed uneasy and ill-tempered.

Kenny's finger trembled as he pushed the round black button set in the door to Moroney's apartment, just beneath the eyehole. Musical chimes sounded loudly within, startling in the morning stillness. Kenny leaned on the button. The music played on and on. Finally he heard footsteps, heavy and threatening. The peephole opened and closed again. Then the door swung open.

The apartment was black, though the far wall was made entirely of glass, so the moonlight illuminated the darkness softly. Outlined against the stars and the lights of the city stood the man who had opened the door. He was hugely, obscenely fat, and his skin was a pasty fungoid white, and he had little dark eyes set deep into crinkles in his broad suety face. He wore nothing but a vast pair of striped shorts. His breasts flopped about against his chest when he shifted his weight. And when he smiled, his teeth filled up half his face. A great crescent moon of teeth. He smiled when he saw Kenny, and Kenny's monkey. Kenny felt sick. The thing in the door weighed twice as much as the one on his back. Kenny trembled. "Where is he?" he whispered softly. "Where is Boney? What have you done to him?"

The creature laughed, and its pendulous breasts flounced about wildly as it shook with mirth. The monkey on Kenny's back began to laugh, too, a higher, thinner laughter as sharp as the edge of a knife. It reached down and twisted Kenny's ear cruelly. Suddenly a vast fear and a vast anger filled Kenny Dorchester. He summoned all the strength left in his wasted body and pushed forward, and somehow, some-

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how, he barged past the obese colossus who barred his way and staggered into the interior of the apartment. "Boney," he called, "where are you, Boney? It's me, Kenny."

There was no answer. Kenny went from room to room. The apartment was filthy, a shambles. There was no sign of Boney Moroney anywhere. When Kenny came panting back to the living room, the monkey shifted abruptly, and threw his off balance. He stumbled and fell hard. Pain went shooting up through his knees, and he cut open one outstretched hand on the edge of the chrome-and-glass coffee table. Kenny began to weep.

He heard the door close, and the thing that lived here moved slowly toward him. Kenny blinked back tears and stared at the approach of those two mammoth legs, pale in the moonlight, sagging all around with fat. He looked up and it was like gazing up the side of a mountain. Far, far above him grinned those terrible mocking teeth. "*Where is he?*" Kenny Dorchester whispered. "What have you done with poor Boney?"

The grin did not change. The thing reached down a meaty hand, fingers as thick as a length of kielbasa, and snagged the waistband of the baggy striped shorts. It pulled them down clumsily, and they settled to the ground like a parachute, bunching around its feet.

"Oh, no," said Kenny Dorchester.

The thing had no genitals. Hanging down between its legs, almost touching the carpet now that it had been freed from the confines of the soiled shorts, was a wrinkled droopy bag of skin, long and gaunt, growing from the creature's crotch. But as Kenny stared at it in horror, it thrashed feebly, and stirred, and the loose folds of flesh separated briefly into tiny arms and legs.

Then it opened its eyes.

Kenny Dorchester screamed and suddenly he was back on his feet, lurching away from the grinning obscenity in the center of the room. Between its legs, the thing that had been Boney Moroney raised its pitiful stick-thin arms in supplication. "Oh, nooooo," Kenny moaned blubbering, and he danced about wildly, the vast weight of his monkey heavy on his back. Round and round he danced in the dimness, in the moonlight, searching for an escape from this madness.

Beyond the plate glass wall the lights of the city beckoned.

Kenny paused and panted and stared at them. Somehow the monkey must have known what he was thinking, for suddenly it began to beat on him wildly, to twist at his ears, to rain savage blows all around his head. But Kenny Dorchester paid no mind. With a smile that was almost beatific, he gathered the last of his strength and rushed pell-mell toward the moonlight.

The glass shattered into a million glittering shards, and Kenny smiled all the way down.

It was the smell that told him

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was still alive, the smell of disinfectant, and the feel of starched sheets beneath him. A hospital, he thought amidst a haze of pain. He was in a hospital. Kenny wanted to cry. Why hadn't he died? Oh, why, oh, why? He opened his eyes, and tried to say something.

Suddenly a nurse was there, standing over him, feeling his brow and looking down with concern. Kenny wanted to beg her to kill him, but the words would not come. She went away, and when she came back she had others with her.

A chubby young man stood by his side and touched him and prodded here and there. Kenny's mouth worked soundlessly. "Easy," the doctor said. "You'll be all right, Mr. Dorchester, but you have a long way to go. You're in a hospital. You're a very lucky man. You fell eight stories. You ought to be dead."

I want to be dead, Kenny thought, and he shaped the words very, very carefully with his mouth, but no one seemed to hear them. Maybe the monkey has taken over, he thought. Maybe I can't even talk anymore.

"He wants to say something," the nurse said.

"I can see that," said the chubby young doctor. "Mr. Dorchester, please don't strain yourself. Really. If you are trying to ask about your friend, I'm afraid he wasn't as lucky as you. He was killed by the fall. You would have died as well, but fortunately you landed on top of him."

Kenny's fear and confusion must have been obvious, for the nurse put a gentle hand on his arm. "The other man," she said patiently. "The fat one. You can thank God he was so fat, too. He broke your fall like a giant pillow."

And finally Kenny Dorchester understood what they were saying, and he began to weep, but now he was weeping for joy, and trembling.

Three days later, he managed his first word. "Pizza," he said, and it came weak and hoarse from between his lips, but the sound elated him and he repeated it, louder, and then louder still, and before long he was pushing the nurse's call button and shouting and pushing and shouting. "Pizza, pizza, pizza, pizza," he chanted, and he would not be calm until they ordered one for him. Nothing had ever tasted so good.

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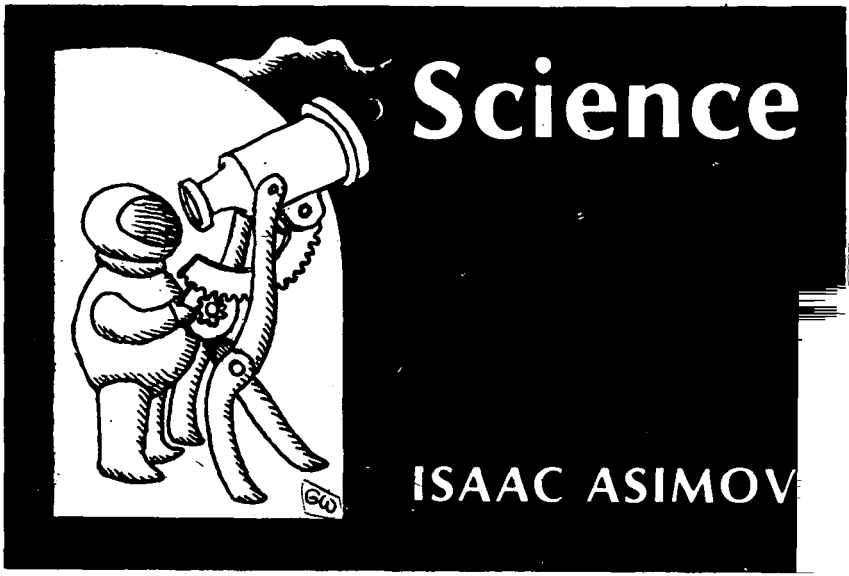

GREEN, GREEN, GREEN, IS THE COLOR —

When I was buying the electric typewriter on which the first draft of this essay is now being written (final copy will be on my word-processor), the salesman placed his final question to me.

"And what color would you like?" he asked, and presented me with a page on which the various colors were illustrated in most lifelike fashion.

For me this was a troublesome question, for I am not visually oriented and I generally don't care what color things might be. Looking over the samples thoughtfully, it struck me that I had had a typewriter of every indicated color but green. I therefore asked for green, and eventually the typewriter arrived.

Whereupon Janet (my dear wife) registered amazement. "Why did you pick green?" she asked.

I explained.

She said, "But your carpet is blue. Or haven't you noticed?"

I looked at the carpet, which I've only had for seven years, and holy smokes, she was right. I said, "Does it make a difference?"

"Most people," she said, "would think that green and blue clash."

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I thought about it and said, "The grass is green and the sky is blue, and people are always talking about the beauties of nature."

For once I had her. She laughed and never said another word about my green typewriter.

I, for my part, however, intend to spend some time talking about green.

In last month's essay, I explained that animals combine the complex molecules of food with the oxygen of the air and, in the process, break down those complex molecules to the relatively simple ones of carbon dioxide and water. The energy liberated by this means is utilized by the animal body in all the energy consuming processes characteristic of life — muscle contraction, nerve impulse, gland secretion, kidney action and so on.

Plants, on the other hand, make use of the energy of sunlight to reverse the above process, combining carbon dioxide and water to form the complex molecules of the type found in food, and liberating oxygen in the process. (This, I explained last month, is called "photosynthesis.")

Plants and animals, taken together, mediate a cyclic chemical process that keeps complex molecules, oxygen, water, and carbon dioxide all in a steady state. The one permanent change is that of the conversion of solar energy into chemical energy.

The question is: what makes plants and animals so different? What is there about plants that makes it possible for them to photosynthesize, making use of the energy of sunlight to do so; and what is there about animals that makes it impossible for them to do the same?

Before we delve into the depths of cells and molecules in search of something very subtle and delicate, we might as well step back and see if there is, by some chance, something very noticeable that would answer our question.

It might seem we might not have much chance of finding something immediately on the surface, since Mother Nature tends to keep her little tricks under her hat, but in this case a very obvious point shows up at once.

One thing that springs to the eye is that all plants, or at least important parts of all plants, are green! What's more, while animals may sport a variety of colors, green is conspicuous by its absence.

Neither statement is completely universal (and I had better say that before some reader does). There are living things which resemble plants in very many ways — growing from the ground, possessing cellulose, and demonstrating various other physical and chemical properties associated with plants — that are, nevertheless, not green. The most familiar examples of this are mushrooms and toadstools, and such non-green plants are lump-

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ed together as "fungi," from a Latin word for mushrooms.

In the same way, there are parrots that, although undoubtedly animals, have plumage of a striking green. (There is, however, no chemical similarity whatsoever between the green of parrot feathers and the green of grass.

Such exceptions are trivial and do not detract from the importance of the generalization that plants are green and animals are not green.

Perhaps, however, this is coincidence; and perhaps the two contrasts — green vs. not-green, and photosynthesis vs. non-photosynthesis — have nothing to do with each other.

Not so! Where plants are in part green and in part not-green, it is invariably in the green portion that photosynthesis takes place. Thus, in a tree, it is the green leaves that we find photosynthesis and not in the brown bark or in the multi-hued flowers. And in fungi, which are plants with no green parts, there is also no photosynthesis. Fungi, like animals, can grow only if complex molecules are already available to them in one way or another.

For that reason we often speak of photosynthesis as taking place, not in plants, but in *green* plants, thus making certain we do not over generalize.

Why should color have anything to do with photosynthesis? Remember that the process requires the use of solar energy.

If sunlight passed right through a plant, none of it could be used to supply the necessary energy. The same would be true if the sunlight were all reflected. In the first case, the plant would be transparent, and in the second case, it would be white, and in neither case would it photosynthesize.

In order for photosynthesis to take place, sunlight must be stopped and absorbed by the plant. If all the sunlight were absorbed, the plant would be black, but such total absorption is not necessary.

Sunlight is a mixture of an enormous number of different wavelengths of light, with each wavelength made up of quanta containing a specific energy content. (The longer the wavelength, the smaller the energy content of the quanta.)

For a particular chemical change to take place, a particular amount of energy must be supplied, and those quanta work best that produce just the right amount. In the case of photosynthesis, it is the red light that works best, and this is a good thing. Red light has the longest wavelengths of visible light; it can penetrate mist and clouds somewhat better than other forms of visible light and is less scattered when the sun is low in the sky. Plants do better, therefore, to depend on red light than any other form of visible light.

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In that case, why bother evolving a photosynthesis system that absorbs anything more than the red light? To absorb shorter wavelengths would serve no purpose, would require the evolution of special compounds with the necessary capability, and would unnecessarily raise the temperature of the plants.

Plants have a photosynthetic system, therefore, that tends to absorb the red portion of the sunlight and to reflect the rest. Reflected sunlight minus the red portion that is absorbed is green in color, so plants that photosynthesize are naturally green, and it is to be expected that plants that are green might well be capable of photosynthesis. The two, greenness and photosynthesis, have a necessary connection, and the fact that one is accompanied by the other is no coincidence.

We have to go beyond mere greenness, however.

If a piece of plant tissue is green, this is only because some specific chemical within that tissue absorbs the red light, reflecting the rest, and that specific chemical is therefore itself green.

Two French chemists, Pierre Joseph Pelletier (1788-1842) and Joseph Bienaimé Caventou (1795-1877), were particularly interested in isolating chemicals of biological importance from plants. Among the chemicals they were the first to isolate, between 1818 and 1821, were alkaloids such as strychnine, quinine, and caffeine.

Even before that, in 1817, they had extracted material that contained the green coloring matter of plants, and they were the first to give that substance its name. They called it "chlorophyll," which comes from Greek words meaning "green leaf."

This advance was important, but it was only a beginning. Pelletier and Caventou might look at a green solution in a test tube and give it a name, but what *is* chlorophyll?

In 1817, the atomic theory was only a decade or so old, and chemists had no way of pinning down the arrangement of atoms within a complicated molecule. It was not until 1906 that the first major attack on the atomic structure of chlorophyll was made, and that was by the German chemist Richard Willstätter (1872-1942).

He was the first to prepare chlorophyll in reasonably pure form and discovered that it was not one but two very closely related chemicals which he called "chlorophyll-a" and "chlorophyll-b," the two differing slightly in their patterns of light absorption. The former was the more common, making up about three-fourths of the mixture.

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Having the chemicals pure, he was able to study the different elements present with considerable confidence that those elements would prove to be actually part of the chlorophyll molecules, and not part of any impurities that might also be present. Chlorophyll contains atoms of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen, but that was no surprise. By Willstätter's time, it was known that virtually every complex molecule in living organisms (so-called "organic molecules") contained carbon, hydrogen and oxygen atoms, and that a good percentage of them contained nitrogen atoms as well.

Willstätter found, however, that chlorophyll contained magnesium atoms, too. It was the first organic molecule discovered to contain that element.

Nowadays, we know that each molecule of chlorophyll-a contains 137 atoms, while each molecule of chlorophyll-b contains 136 atoms.

A molecule of chlorophyll-a is, at present, known to have 72 hydrogen atoms, 55 carbon atoms, 5 oxygen atoms, 4 nitrogen atoms, and 1 magnesium atom. A molecule of chlorophyll-b has two hydrogen atoms less and one oxygen atom more.

If one knows the total number of atoms in a molecule and how many of each variety are present, that still amounts to very little. What counts is the arrangement of these atoms, and 136 or 137 atoms of five different kinds can be arranged in an astronomical number of different ways.

One way of getting some hint of the arrangement is to somehow break up the complex molecules into simpler fragments, which one can then study. A particular fragment might contain no more than a dozen or so atoms of three different kinds, and might fit together reasonably well in only two or three different ways. It might even be that chemical experience would lead one to suppose that the chances of one particular arrangement of those few atoms was much more likely than any other.

Then, to settle the matter, chemists could actually synthesize various molecules containing the requisite number of different kinds of atoms in each of the different arrangements that are at all likely, comparing each one with the fragment obtained from the chlorophyll molecule. When an identity of properties shows up, you know that your fragment is equivalent to the synthesized compound that it matches.

In this way, Willstätter discovered that among the fragments of the chlorophyll molecules were to be found small molecules containing four carbon atoms and a nitrogen atom, these five atoms being arranged in a ring. The simplest such ring has one hydrogen atom attached to each of the

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five atoms of the ring. This compound was named "pyrrole" by the German chemist Friedlieb Ferdinand Runge (1794-1867), who first isolated it in 1834. The name is from a Greek word for a fiery red, since when pyrrole is treated with certain acids, a bright red substance is formed.

It seemed logical, therefore, to suppose that chlorophyll consisted of pyrrole rings arranged in some fashion that produced a still more complicated pattern. In 1912, a chemist named William Küster proposed that four pyrrole rings could form a larger ring, each pair of pyrroles being connected by a bridge consisting of a single carbon atom.

A compound made up of such a ring of pyrrole rings is called a "porphyrin," a term first used by the German biochemist Felix Hoppe-Seyler (1825-1895) in the 1860's. Porphyrin comes from a Greek word for "purple," since many porphyrins are purple in color.

By the time Willstätter's work was done, then, it seemed fairly certain that chlorophyll possessed a molecule that had a porphyrin ring at its core, but there were still plenty of details that required elucidation.

The porphyrin ring-of-rings possesses many symmetries in the arrangement of the atoms, and these symmetries contribute to the stability of the molecule. (The American chemist Linus Pauling [1901-] demonstrated this sort of thing in his revolutionary application of quantum mechanics to molecular structure fifty years ago.) Consequently, the porphyrin structure, with its ring skeleton made up of 20 carbon atoms and 4 nitrogen atoms, is commonly found in life and is included in various essential compounds in both plants and animals, and not in chlorophyll alone.

Thus, in many animals (including human beings) there is a purplish porphyrin, "heme." This heme, when attached to an appropriate protein, forms "hemoglobin," the red substance that absorbs oxygen at the lungs, or gills, and delivers it to the tissue cells. In combination with other proteins, heme forms enzymes involved in the handling of oxygen by the cells, and these are found universally in all oxygen-using cells, plant and animal.

It is a sample of the economy of nature that the same stable ring of rings can, with slight modification, produce the green chlorophyll so essential to plants, and the heme so useful to animals. (Whereas, in chlorophyll, the green color is of the essence, in heme, the purple color is a mere side issue and plays no part in its functioning.)

But how is the porphyrin ring modified to form this compound or that?

The four pyrrole rings are arranged with the nitrogen atoms pointing toward the center. The two carbon atoms adjacent to the nitrogen atom in

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each pyrrole ring are involved in the large ring formation (those carbon atoms are what the pyrrole rings "hold hands" with).

That leaves the two carbon atoms at the far end of the pyrrole ring free. These eight carbon atoms (two in each of the pyrrole rings) can each be attached to a "side-chain" consisting of one or more carbon atoms to which, in turn, still other atoms may be attached. What particular side-chains are involved, then, and where on the porphyrin ring does each side-chain go?

The problem was tackled by the German chemist Hans Fischer (1881-1945) in the 1920's. He worked with heme and, knocking off the side-chains, he studied and analyzed the resulting mixture. He demonstrated that each heme molecule has four side-chains consisting of 1 carbon atom and 3 hydrogen atoms (a "methyl group"); two more consisting of 2 carbon atoms and 3 hydrogen atoms (a "vinyl group"), and two side-chains consisting of 3 carbon atoms, 5 hydrogen atoms and 2 oxygen atoms (a "propionic acid group").

These eight groups of three different varieties can be arranged about the porphyrin-ring skeleton in fifteen different ways. Which way is correct?

Fischer had developed methods for synthesizing porphyrin molecules, complete with side-chains, and he therefore adopted a strategy of mass assault. He told each of fifteen graduate students to synthesize a different porphyrin molecule with the side-chains arranged in a particular fashion, so that, among them, all fifteen would be produced. By 1929, he showed that a particular one of the fifteen was correct. The side-chain arrangement, as one goes around the porphyrin ring, turned out to be methyl, vinyl, methyl, vinyl, methyl, propionic acid, propionic acid, methyl.

Fisher then went on to tackle chlorophyll. Obviously, there would have to be differences, the major one being that heme had an iron atom at the center of the porphyrin ring, while chlorophyll had a magnesium atom. However, if the iron atom was knocked out of the first and the magnesium atom out of the second, what was left in the two cases were not identical. There were other differences as well.

To begin with, the four methyl groups are in the same place in the chlorophyll-porphyrin as in the heme-porphyrin. So are the two vinyl groups, except that in the second one two additional hydrogen atoms are added to form an "ethyl group." The propionic acid groups are in the same place as in heme but are considerably modified. One of the propionic acid groups curls around to combine with the adjacent pyrrole ring to form a fifth ring, and an additional carbon atom is added to it. In the case of the other, it dangles free, but a long 20-carbon chain (the "phytyl group") is attached to it.

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At least, that's chlorophyll-a. In chlorophyll-b, one of the methyl side-chains is converted into an "aldehyde group," which is made up of one atom each of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen.

This description of the chlorophyll structure was deduced from Fischer's analyses of fragments, but the final confirmation could not come until a chlorophyll structure was built up in the laboratory, one that matched the suggested structure. If the synthetic molecule then proved to be identical in all properties to the natural one, the structure would be proved beyond a reasonable doubt.

Chlorophyll has a more complicated structure than heme does, however, and its synthesis eluded Fischer. Nor was it successfully achieved till 1960, when the American chemist Robert Burns Woodward (1917-1979) managed the job — and the structure was confirmed.

Once we have chlorophyll, and can even synthesize it, does the possibility arise that we can short circuit the plant world? Perhaps we can isolate chlorophyll, and set it to work in large chemical plants. Shining light upon it and supplying it with favorable conditions, might we get it to convert carbon dioxide and water into food substances with high efficiency and without the necessity of its wasting effort in supplying the needs of plant structure and functioning?

Not so! Put chlorophyll in a test tube and expose it to light, and it does *not* photosynthesize. Even if you extract other compounds also present in plant cells and add them to the chlorophyll there will be no photosynthesis taking place. Apparently, within plant cells, chlorophyll is part of an intricate and well organized system that acts as a smoothly working whole to carry through a photosynthetic process including many steps. Chlorophyll makes the key step possible, and without it nothing can happen, but the key step, by itself, is also not enough.

An organism is made up of cells, but each cell is not an unorganized drop of protoplasm. Rather, within each cell, are still tinier structures called "organelles," each one of which is itself highly organized. As examples, one important type of organelle present in virtually all cells are "chromosomes," which contain the genetic machinery that makes reproduction possible. Another are the "mitochondria," which are the powerhouses of the cell, and contain a complex enzyme system so organized as to make it possible to combine food and oxygen in such a way as to produce energy in a controlled and useful way.

Within plant cells, chlorophyll it turns out is also confined to certain or-

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ganelles. This was first demonstrated in 1865 by the German plant physiologist Julius von Sachs (1832-1897). These organelles were eventually named "chloroplasts."

Chloroplasts are large organelles, two to three times as long and as thick as mitochondria, for instance, and it is not surprising that the chloroplast structure is correspondingly the more complex of the two.

The interior of the chloroplast is made up of many thin membranes stretched across the width of the organelle. These are the "lamellae." In most types of chloroplasts, these lamellae thicken and darken in places to form condensations called "grana." The chlorophyll molecules are to be found within the grana.

If the grana are studied under the electron microscope, they, in turn, seem to be made up of tiny units, just barely visible, that look like the neatly laid tiles of a bathroom floor. Each of these objects may be a photosynthesizing unit containing 250 to 300 chlorophyll molecules.

The chloroplasts are more difficult to handle than mitochondria are; for, with increased structural complexity, it would seem, comes added fragility. When cells are broken up, for instance, mitochondria can be isolated, intact, with relative ease, and can even be made to continue to perform their function.

Not so with the chloroplasts. Even gentle methods of extracting them from fragmented cells will succeed in destroying them. Even when they look intact, they are not, for they will not photosynthesize.

It was not until 1954, that the Polish-American plant physiologist Daniel Israel Arnon (1910-) working with disrupted spinach leaf cells, was able to obtain chloroplasts sufficiently intact to allow them to carry through the complete photosynthetic reaction.

Is that the answer, then? Do we isolate chloroplasts, rather than chlorophyll, and set them working in the laboratory under optimal conditions, and churning out starch, fat, and protein for us?

Theoretically, yes, but practically, no. In the first place, we would have to depend on the plant world for the supply of chloroplasts. In the second, chloroplasts are so fragile that we would forever have to be renewing our supply. It would be enormously cheaper and more efficient in the long run to continue to use the chloroplasts where they can easily preserve and reproduce themselves — inside the intact and living plant cell.

But why try to duplicate photosynthesis on the plant's terms? Might we not find a substitute?

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The key step in photosynthesis is the splitting of the water molecule into hydrogen and oxygen. Chemists can do that easily, but only at the cost of a large energy input. They can do it by heating the water molecules strongly enough to vibrate them to pieces, or by passing an electric current through a diluted solution of sulfuric acid so that electric charges can pull the molecules apart. Both the heat and electricity, however, represent a massive input of energy. The hydrogen we can isolate in this way, when recombined with oxygen would liberate considerable energy that we can then utilize — but the energy liberated would be not nearly as great as the energy we expended to break up the water molecule and obtain the hydrogen in the first place.

Suppose, though, we could split the water molecule by making use of sunlight, as plants do. To be sure the energy of sunlight would be greater than the energy we would then obtain by combining the liberated hydrogen with oxygen, but we would not have to invest anything to produce the sunlight. The sunlight is always there and would just go to waste if we did not use it.

Plants do this through their chloroplasts, but can *we* do it through some simpler system — stable, efficient, and working tirelessly according to our direction?

The hydrogen and oxygen we would form from water could be recombined to yield energy that would be more concentrated and useful than the original sunlight would be. In the process, water molecules would be reformed. Neither water, hydrogen nor oxygen would ever be consumed, and the only permanent change would be the conversion of dilute sunlight into concentrated chemical energy. The process could continue as long as the sun shone in its present manner.

What's more, once the hydrogen is formed, we might work out methods for combining it with carbon dioxide to form food. In this way, we could look forward to a future in which human beings, at need, could do without the plant world altogether. We would get food and fuel at the expense of sunlight.

Naturally, I am not advocating the elimination of the plant world, but there might be times when we would temporarily have to do without it — on long voyages through space in ships not large enough for an ordinary ecological balance, for instance. It would be useful, then, if we could set up an artificial system that would turn the trick.

And chemists are on the track. The American biochemist Melvin Calvin (1911-) who, in 1961, obtained a Nobel Prize for his work in decipher-

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ing the details of the photosynthetic reaction, is using synthetic metal-containing compounds designed to mimic the activity of chlorophyll. Others are also in the field.

So far, no one has quite created the equivalent of an artificial plant cell, but there is no reason why success should not come about eventually, and make it possible for human beings to supplement their food and fuel supply in this way; and even, at need, to function for lengthy periods in a situation in which they themselves (plus their internal parasites) are the only living organisms.

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This is the first of two stories we've brought from a promising new writer who lives in North Carolina and tells us that he is a graduate of the Clarion SF Writers Workshop. It's a stunningly different space story about a ship of colonists who have been reduced by a series of accidents to a few survivors.

A Day In the Life of Justin Argento Morrel

BY

GREG FROST

I

The stellar-wind ship *Flavus* orbits high above the black hole's maw. Inside the ship live four people: one who likes to dance in the face of black hole gravities; one who can't recall his name; one who wishes to be known as "the Commander," kept strapped into his bed; and the other one, Justin Morrel.

His official title is "Energy-conversion Engineer," a title that barely hints at the reservoirs of knowledge in the man; but titles have little meaning aboard the *Flavus*. He sits in his workroom — a room that these days he rarely leaves — straddling one lowered petal of his bulb chair. His favorite chair. The petal is hinged beneath the V of his crotch, with the three remaining petals folded up behind him, surrounding him like an enormous, frozen, hollow teardrop, or like a womb.

An extender lamp, the sole source of light in the room at present, hovers

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vulturously above him, creating a corona over his dun-colored hair, highlighting his sharp cheeks, burying his crystal blue eyes in the rough-edged shadows of his dark brows.

In the palm of his hand, Justin cradles a disembodied arm. The fingers of the arm are stiffly splayed and rest on a flat plate at the tip of the curved petal. The arm is almost alabaster in color — like the arm of a mythic snow princess. It is hairless and the wrist too slender and delicate to be a man's. The arm ends at the elbow — not in bloodied and shredded tissue, but in braided wire and translucent tubing.

Justin fits a tiny magnifier into the hollow of his right eye, then sights down one of the translucent tubes as if seeking a parallax. His stomach sighs over the cloth belt of his jumpsuit.

In the darkness on his left, two wide transparent doors present a view of the lowest corridor of the ship, of shiny anodized walls and dim yellow light. Halfway between Justin and the doors, a silhouetted figure stands motionless.

The figure is Commander Francis Vomer. He wears only form-fitting briefs over his rippling hard physique. The eyes in his square-set face are hooded, calculating and insane. He watches raptly Justin's every move, although the scene is as meaningless to him as graffiti in Aramaic. Every few minutes Vomer takes a silent swift half-step nearer the light. Justin supposes him to be sleeping under sedation, strapped onto his bed where he has been kept for months, ever since he tried to jettison the solar sails.

Unaware of the evil skulking presence, Justin continues to check each tube assiduously and lets his thoughts wander around the woman he loves: E. B. "Kitty" Strunk. ("I love you, Kitty, don't you understand? Let me show you, come to bed.") He has tried to win her affections ever since they awoke from cryogenic slumber two years ago, but she has yet to respond with anything more dazzling than a passing buss on the cheek.

Right now she is outside somewhere enjoying her favorite pastime: waltzing to made-up mental tunes in the gravitational fields above event horizon. Recurring visions of her falling forever into the black hole have plagued Justin since the first time she went out. His rational side knows, however, that she is safe so long as her line remains secured to the ship. In his chair, Justin daydreams of the figure in space, an egg bobbing at the end of an umbilical. His X-ray mind slices away the suit. He pictures her naked body firm and slender. He has a fair idea how large her breasts are. She exercises each day, expressing an inflexible desire to stay fit, though for whom she is exercising is beyond him, seeing as how he never gets to touch her, and Vomer is sedated; the only other member of the crew is Clancey, who is over eighty years old and incapable of any activity more strenuous than a slow drool.

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The scene changes. Justin, reclining in a lowered command chair, watches Kitty kneeling above him, her body bathed in the deep red glow of the control console LEDs. She wriggles his mighty erection into her and coos softly. ("I want you, I need you, I love you, oh, *Justin*!")

He sighs, "Ah, Kitty."

"Ah, Kitty," parrots Vomer with nasal emphasis. He sneers.

The magnifier drops from Justin's wide eye and bounces on the floor.

Vomer chuckles. "Hey, Justin," he calls, singsong, and strolls closer. "Guess where I've been."

Justin's thought careen. Where's my gun, where's the damn service revolver?! How did he get free this time? Christ, what's he destroyed now?! God *damn* Kitty, she was supposed to put him out for four hours before she went out. Four hours....

He glances fleetingly at his bandless watch, sees that the four hours passed an entire hour ago.

"Oh, boy," he mutters, calculating the damage Vomer can inflict in a single unrestrained hour. At the same time he reviews locations, scenes, phantom tabletops in search of the lost gun. Sweat trickles down his ribs. He never knew why guns had been issued to the crew until Vomer went crazy; now he knows he can't seem to hang onto the damn thing. His throat is dry, tickling, trying to make him cough. "Where — where have you been, Franci — er, Commander?" Mustn't forget how Vomer feels toward his first name. ("All right, everyone, let's understand right off that my first name on this voyage is Commander. Got that? Fine. Then, into the cylinders.")

"Guess," Vomer urges.

You stupid sick son of a bitch, how should I know?

Justin does not say this. If he had the goddamn gun he would say it. "Why, Commander, I really couldn't guess."

Grinning like a rabid wolf, Commander Francis Vomer says, "I was in the air lock. I released Kitty's line. Zoom." He performs an imbecilic terror-mime and titters at the impression.

A phobic image devours Justin: an elephantine spacesuit dropping down, down, slower, slower, until its albedo and its form are absorbed. Gone....

Justin swings a leg over the lowered petal, pushes off and past Vomer, who is too busy laughing at his impersonation to interfere.

The doors open silently, and Justin bolts down the anodized corridor, past the rooms of the dead — rooms no one feels the least desire to use. The tumbling Kitty clogs his thoughts; he hears her panic-stricken cry, but it comes from his lips. The faceplate of her suit fogs over with her breath. The last impeding doors slide open, and he hurls into the department chamber, plunges into the air lock, hits the buttons with his forearm, all the while cursing the slowness of the hissing doors, then realizes he is about to launch

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into space unprotected.

Vomer, you bastard you—

The door whooshes open. Justin madly wrenches the portable emergency life system from the wall, screams a silent scream, and is sucked out the door. His thumb flicks the switch on the life system, and a glowing oxygen-rich field pops into place around him.

He was in time. He wouldn't even lose a toe. He sighs.

The gravitational havoc of the Schwarzchild radius snatches him, and Justin Darius Argento Morrel, in his sparkling field, becomes a vulcanized Ping-Pong ball.

He rebounds against the ship, smacking his head on a grill plate; blood surges from his nose. The world explodes in crackling starbow colors that spin away like dying fireworks. His last thought: She enjoys *this?*

The *Flavus* was sent out from Earth as one of three colonizing ships, each on a hopeful journey to a new world. Three ships were all the Earth could afford, and the majority of the crews were volunteers — Justin Morrel among them — all too happy to escape what appeared to be certain annihilation by starvation and social madness. The crews were placed in cylinders — cryogenic life-support systems, one cylinder per person. There were thirty-two people aboard the *Flavus*. They were asleep through departure and were not to awaken again for sixty-three years.

But somehow the delicate cryogenics control went awry.

Two years out from Sol, twenty-nine of the thirty-two cylinders suddenly snapped open, filling the room with hydrogen-nitrogen mist that heated rapidly — a fact later established from traces of an ammonia rain in the chamber. Of the twenty-nine people released, eighteen died of emboli*sms, five died from systemic shock in*duced by the combined rude awakening and the unknown source of heat that had apparently caused the malfunction in the first place. Six survived.

The three cylinders containing Morrel, Vomer, and Strunk remained sealed and flawlessly functioning — or malfunctioning, depending on how you considered it. The six survivors voted to leave them as they were, unconcious and oblivious, in the hope that these three might yet establish a colony. The six would manually pilot the *Flavus* to its new home, essentially giving their lives to the cause. This information and a recorded distress message sent long before to Earth were the only pieces of hard fact the three had when they awoke sixty-one years later. The remainder of the record had been sabotaged. Erased. They found the *Flavus* not orbiting Epsilon Eridani as expected, but hovering instead above a black hole. They found also one old man wandering through the ship; he was filthy, his beard long and tangled, hi

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clothing caked in places with his own excrement. For some inexplicable reason he reeked of garlic. He could barely talk and spoke mostly gibberish when he did have occasion to say anything. When asked his name, he urinated, then replied, "Clancey." No one by that name had ever been part of the crew, but no one knew who he had been, so Clancey he remained.

Vomer cracked after three weeks. He was a born leader with no one to lead and no place to lead them. He lacked the means to determine their coordinates because the computer had, at some point prior to his awakening, been rendered practically useless: two-thirds of its memory cells had been removed and could not be found. Without the computer, only one member of the crew had the technical ability and background to attempt coordinating their location. Justin was thus unwillingly forced into the limelight, into a hated position of command. Vomer became the victim of a mental singularity; like a black hole, insanity sucked away at his mind. He arrived at a state of supreme calmness and presumption — a sort of zen with the black hole outside.

He attempted suicide. Justin and Kitty found him stuck halfway into a garbage liquidation unit. Vomer fought desperately and powerfully for a man on his side, one-third of the way up a wall, and up to his ass in a liquidator. He took Justin's gun and tried to eat the barrel, managing only to put three rounds into the bulkhead. His captors beat him senseless, took him to his room, strapped him to his bed, and pumped him full of sedatives. The garbage liquidator never worked properly again.

Justin and Kitty labored together for a week afterwards, attempting Euclidean projections to locate themselves. In the end they succeeded, but by that time Justin had fallen hopelessly in love with Kitty. He never got around to plotting a departure route, though he did direct their laser beacon toward Earth. Each time he sat down to work out an escape, he found himself humming and composing sonnets to the woman he loved. It seemed then that she cared for him. The desire to return to home dissipated. Yet, she repelled his amorous advances and explained that her love was merely platonic. He was hope-dashed. She comforted him with the first of her endless bright strings of encouragement. ("Justin, poor baby, I, well, need time, just give me time.")

Time is all she has ever asked for, and all that he has been allowed to give, although he has a definite goal in mind. But time is not Justin's friend.

Time sits rolling blank white dice with Vomer.

Red light sprinkles in, illumination's snowflakes melting in the Hades of Justin's closed eyelids. He exposes his eyes a wafer-thin crack; painfully brilliant white light seems to be every-

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where. Why doesn't someone shut it off? Hardness presses against his back. Where is he?

A shadow falls across his face, blocking off some of the ceiling lamps, an oasis of dark safety for him to look at, a blurry figure kneeling beside him. He brings into focus an ovoid face with beautifully flushed cheeks, blonde lashes and brows, and waterfall hair that tickles his blood-encrusted nose. The strained expression of tension ages her perfect features.

"Kitty," he says, his voice graveled.

She smiles reassurances and pats his cheek. Her hand is spongy and cold. Justin realized she is still housed in her environ-suit — all but the helmet.

Kitty's face moves falteringly up and away. He is alive, and can be left for the moment. The painful light floods over him again, but he turns his head and shields his eyes to watch the woman in the Humpty-Dumpty-shaped suit. She presses at three spots along its equator and the suit pops apart, the bottom held up solely by her wide stance. Her arms withdraw into the suit, then raise the upper half over her head. Her breasts are drawn tightly against her ribs. Tufts of blond hair glisten in her armpits. Justin's head rises from the floor. He blinks to clear his eyes.

He never knew she went out naked before: his thoughts drift to dreamy visions of Kitty bouncing around in the flow of gravity, laughing, singing, masturbating. ("I'd love to go to bed with you, Justin, I honestly would, but not now because I need my daily exercise, so keep an eye on Vomer while I'm out. All right? Dear Justin, don't be so glum. We've plenty of time, plenty of time.") He is both hurt and angered by what he assumes; how many times has he heard a similar excuse from her? That lingering promise of an imminent rendezvous which never arrives, and why should it? He reaches limply out to her. He wants to take her hand, to sniff, to lick away an essence he's yearned for over the past two years. For all she knows, he knows, he might be dying right now from internal ruptures. A few drops of such elixir could keep him alive, might bring him springing to his feet with new vitality. His fingers strain.

She misinterprets his failing gesture. Stepping from the lower half of the suit, she goes to him, cups his wrist, then strokes it while saying, "There, there." She kneels beside him.

Justin tugs on her hand with renewed vitality, brings it to his lips. Kissing, he sniffs. Damn it all, she's right-handed. He tries to grasp her other hand, but it has vanished behind her back, where he can hear it scratching. He begins to itch all over. His eyes water.

"Justin, don't cry. Have you ... oh no, not you, too? Now I'll never get out of this black hole. I'll kill myself, Justin, I swear it! I *depended* on you! How — oh, how dare you lose your mind!"

Justin groans and lowers his head.

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"Kitty, how did you get back in?"

She drops his wrist as if it is diseased. "My God, you *are* insane."

His nostrils flare. He winces as the blood caked there tugs at the hairs in his nose. "Just answer the question."

"How do you think I got in? I came in on my line. How were *you* planning to get back in?"

"But Vomer got loose, came into my workshop and said he cut your line."

Kitty stares at him blankly. Then her eyes narrow. "Shit." She stands swiftly. "Clancey?" she shouts.

Justin blocks the light and peers between her ankles. He sees that the old man has been sitting against the bulkhead and watching them all this time. Clancey rises as swiftly as bread dough, having to turn around and press himself up the curved wall. He shuffles toward them.

That stupid old fool, what is he going to do? Justin attempts to sit up and immediately flops back. Nausea quilts his body, and the room spins like a tired old windmill.

Clancey leans over him, giving Justin the horrible impression that the old man is about to vomit on him. Clancey's white hair is shaggy and his beard grows high up on his ragged cheeks; his mouth is a crooked hole within. An enormous wrinkled finger appears between that face and Justin's rolling eyes. The finger waggles at him as Clancey announces, "Fish out of water."

Justin whimpers.

Kitty says, "Keep an eye on him, Clancey, and I'll be back in a little while." The old man nods solemnly, his scrutiny that of a guard over a captured enemy soldier.

Justin calls weakly to Kitty, but she is gone, and he is vaguely aware that she is marching away, her bare feet squeaking down the corridor. The face of Clancey, like a hoary Medusa, glowers down at him. Justin closes his eyes to escape it, then begins to imagine what is taking place elsewhere. He sees Kitty enter his workshop. Vomer's back is to her as he rips the wires from the arm Justin has made, popping holes in its flesh with his spatulate thumb. Kitty pauses briefly to look around her; she has never been in the workshop before, allowing Justin his privacy, his island. She glides up behind Vomer and kicks him squarely in the crotch. Justin smiles. Vomer bites into the ruined arm to keep from screaming, the extender lamp splitting into colors that swirl like rings of Saturn around his head. A thousand hands clap for him. Finally, he crumples to the floor, a puddle of his former self. Kitty tumbles him into the bulb chair, folding up his rubbery knees and slamming the petals into place. Then she looks around her. Will she see what he is designing? Will the arm tip his hand, so to speak? If she does comprehend his project, what then? No, he's safe; she won't know whom he has designed it for.

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Justin sighs and picks at the brown blood-crust rimming his nostrils. Silently he curses Vomer. So much hate, it could vaporize his blood cells.

Vomer has broken out of restraints three times before this. On the first, he was seized while setting a cockroach trap using raspberry syrup, a pencil, and one of his shoes. There are no cockroaches on the *Flavus*. On his second escape, Vomer attempted to open all the doors on the ship to, as he put it, "get a little cross-ventilation going." While free the last time, he threw out the ceiling panels in the departure room, then sabotaged the food preparation system. Although there is enough food to last them a lifetime, for the past three months it has been meatloaf every meal. Before that, they endured weeks of frozen gazpacho.

Justin admits to having felt sorry for Vomer at first. He could sympathize with the lost-command syndrome, though deep down inside he despises the stratification of rank and privilege and so disliked Vomer as its representative. But now the situation has changed: Vomer has attempted to kill him. Justin has believed for some time that the commander becomes more dangerous with each passing day, while Kitty — who professes to be a *psychologist!* — seems unaware of this and refuses to listen when Justin explains what could happen if a rescue party showed up while Vomer was loose. This thought leads Justin to speculate on what may have been damaged before Vomer showed up in his workroom. Did he shut off their Mayday beacon? Did he try and take the ship out of orbit? There is so much for him to ruin; everything will have to be checked.

He knows his best bet is to kill Vomer as soon as possible, but he believes himself incapable of cold-blooded murder. He has tried repeatedly to stare it in the face and has lost his nerve on each occasion. The most he could do would be to humiliate Vomer to death.

That is why he has begun work on his new project. Vomer may have slowed it down, but all such damage can be repaired. The other pieces are safely tucked away, and the assemblage will take no time at all and will take care of Vomer once and for all. The arm, if it's been destroyed, will be a snap to rebuild. The head and torso are complete, as are the logic circuits and allophoder. Hardest of all was the construction of the self-lubricating vagina which Justin had to build from scratch, androids being sexless. But he made do.

Justin had been against the inclusion of android parts aboard the *Flavus*. They have intimidated him ever since they appeared on the market, for reasons that lie too deep in the reptilian core of his mind to be explainable. But like cars and transistors and nuclear weapons before them, androids were the technical vogue, and no well-dressed ship could be without

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some. They came, to serve.

The irony of this does not escape him.

He rolls onto his hands and knees. His head lolls between his shoulders. His jumpsuit is torn, a hole exposing a chubby doughnut around his navel.

Clancey sees that he is awake and shuffles from one foot to another, cracking a smile like an old vaudevillian who still thinks he's got it. "Fish out of water?" he asks hopefully.

"Go 'way, go 'way." Justin starts the tortuous climb to his feet.

Clancey stands perfectly still, then executes an abrupt turn and pushes his feet toward the door. He will wander on through the ship until some arbitary point of destination is reached. Justin has seen him do this hundreds of times. More often than not Clancey ends up in the cryogenics room, plugging his ears and wailing to his dead companions. What does he hear? Do their voices call to him from the other side? Does some essence of them, sustained by the artificial eternity of the nearby singularity, still lurk in the empty cylinders? It is assumed that their bodies were cast into space, one by one, as they died. However, Clancey, in a rare moment of lucidity, once recounted how he had put a few for safekeeping in the food processing units. "Did anyone else find a belt buckle in heir soup besides me?")

Justin regrets having yelled at the old man. Clancey seems to share his dislike for Vomer, even avoided him before Vomer cracked up. After all, Clancey is truly harmless and possessed of the supreme gentleness found only in idiots and prey.

Poor, poor old man, thinks Justin. He staggers away to survey Vomer's havoc.

Vomer destroyed the ship-to-ship communication system and launched a Mayday beacon, their last.

The extender lamp, tuned to maximum intesity, spreads an even light that casts sharp, deep shadows across the debris scattered throughout the workroom. Justin has cleared most of this from the far wall. Along that wall a nude female figure walks back and forth at his commands. She is medium height, with long dark hair, a wig. Her perfect body is hairless, like the body of an overendowed child. She wears no expression, as if nudity makes her vapid, and she performs each task with mechanical, thoughtless subservience. Justin hopes Vomer will fail to notice this.

In his favorite chair, he reclines with his feet propped on the lowered petal. "You can stop now," he tells her. She draws herself up, faces him, stands paralytically. Looking her over, he feels nothing but pride. Vomer can only be delighted. "Hestia," he says to her, pleased with the name, "you remember what you're to say to the commander?"

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"Yes, Jus-tin." Her voice is soft and rich, a milk bath.

"Let's go for a walk." He squirms out of the chair as Hestia threads her way to him through the rubble of her creation. Then, with Justin in the lead, they move to the doors. He drops back beside her and extends his head to plant a happy kiss on her cheek. At the last moment Hestia faces him and takes the kiss on her lips. Justin stumbles as her hands grip the back of his head and her lips part and her tongue flicks against his teeth.

He wildly forces his head away. "Hestia!" he hisses, and pulls her arms down.

"I was just practicing," she explains.

"Yes, well, well, that's fine. I guess." They walk along the hall again, Justin and his creation. He noticed, among other things, that her tongue was too silky to be real. What will Vomer think? He regards her with apprehension and wonders just what he's created here.

They pass Clancey drifting along. He seems to have hurt himself — walks hunched over, dragging one foot slightly. "Hello, Major," he calls. To Hestia he smiles and bobs his head. She reaches out as Clancey goes by. Justin slaps down her hand. "No," he commands. Hestia pouts.

They climb the ladder to the next deck, Hestia above, giving Justin an unblushing view that he finds embarrassing. Blushing, he looks down and thinks of Kitty, recalling his view of her from where he lay on the floor. She isn't built quite as nicely as he had expected. Her stomach is rounder and her breasts not as firm as in his fantasies of her. Nevertheless, the memory is getting him horny. He wonders where she has been keeping herself while he toiled in his lab.

Outside Vomer's door Justin stops Hestia from entering. "Not yet. The commander may be sleeping, and I want to set the stage. Everything has to be just right or this won't work. Now, you stay right here until I open the door for you. O.K.?"

"O-kay."

Justin touches the doorplate, and the door slides back. He places a chummy grin on his face and strolls in, a casual hipster. "Hey, Vomer, I—" His mouth hangs open without words, and his eyes cannot look away, though they burn at what they see.

Vomer is on his back, on his bed, naked. Kitty sits straddling him the way she straddled Justin in Justin's dream. Both of them have stopped moving, a frozen scenario in dim lover's light.

Kitty twists around. "Justin," she gasps. "Get out."

"No," Justin says, not answering, but trying to deny it all.

Kitty pulls away from Vomer, jumps down and heads toward him. Her body glistens with sexual sweat, the blonde hair under her arms and on her legs sparkles. She reaches out to

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comfort him, and he backs away. The closed door traps him. Kitty's hands embrace his stubbled cheeks. "Let me explain, Justin, please."

"Kitty," Vomer calls hungrily.

"Get away from me!" Justin snaps, and he shoves her. She comes at him again. He shouts, "You liar! All this time you've been promising, putting me off so you could diddle with that brainless lump."

"Hey," Vomer thunders. He sits up and swings his feet to the floor.

"You've been lying to me for two years, Kitty — sneaking in here to him! Haven't you?"

She tries to smile. "Yes, Justin, but I can explain all that if you'll give me the chance. Francis—"

"Don't call me Francis!"

Kitty cranes her head back. "Will you shut up and let me talk to him, for God's sake?"

"Don't bother," Justin snarls. "I wouldn't want to interrupt your coitus any further." His hand hits the doorplate, and he realizes in horror what he's done, but it's too late to stop that door.

Hestia charges past Justin and flings her arms around Kitty. The two naked bodies press together.

"Darling," coos Hestia. Then she kisses Kitty hard on the mouth.

Kitty twists free and backs up two steps, breasts jiggling. "What the *hell* is going on? God, she's plastic!"

"Hi there," calls Vomer. He waves at Hestia. She stands, momentarily dismayed, shining with Kitty's transferred sweat.

"Oh, God." Justin eyes the ceiling.

"Justin? What have you ... she's an android!"

He backs toward the nearest corner. "I can explain," he begins, but stops, realizing he sounds just like Kitty. He fumes in the hope of regaining some control. "She's a gift to Vomer. I figured if he had something to occupy his time, then you and I could ... could be *together*." Almost in tears, he cries out. "If there was something to occupy him, then you and I would find each other without him to get in the way again and again."

"Playing *God*, Justin!"

Hestia says, "Let's go for a walk outside, Commander."

"Playing *Justin*, Kitty. Shut up, Hestia!"

"Sure," says Vomer.

"Just sit down, Francis, you're not going anywhere!" Kitty shouts. She closes on Justin in his corner. "She's supposed to take him outside?" Her hands come up like claws. "God, Justin, how could you even consider such a thing?"

"How could I?" He presses his palms against his forehead. "I hate his guts, that's how. Now more than ever. You've spent half your time out in space and the rest in here with him — with a lunatic — I haven't had ten minutes with you in nearly two years. And on top of that the son of a bitch has tried to kill me! Do you understand?

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Can you see? You're sleeping with Lizzie Borden's brother!" he roars. "Where's your training? How could I want to kill him? Christ, Kitty, it was the easiest thing in the world!"

She cloaks herself in calmness and affects concern. Her claws become hands again, turning up, offering comfort, the hands of Jesus. "Justin, this must be very hard for you, but I know I can make you understand if you'll only relax now and let me—"

"Stop it! This won't work anymore. Do you think me stupid enough to go for your compassionate act now? Have you ever stopped lying to me, manipulating me? Ever?"

A change falls across her like a cloud, darkening her features. The sweetness is cast off, no longer useful. "No," she says. "Never. And I had to do it that way, too. If I hadn't treated you that way, you wouldn't be here now. You would have closed off completely or even committed suicide. What would I have then? Francis? A great conversationalist, Francis."

"Then you do comprehend it."

She laughs. "Back to my training again? You think I have to be a psychologist to see what's wrong with him? Well, I guess one more revelation won't damage you now, so what the hell. I'm not a psychologist, Justin. I never have been."

Most terrible of lies! It becomes an actual pain, a stab in his chest. Two years, he's been working with ... with an *amateur*. "What are you, then?"

"You don't know even now?"

He closes his eyes. "I don't want to know."

"I'm his lover. I was his lover on Earth. He got me here, bought or lied or connived me here, and all I had to do was sleep with him, with his hard, fine body. You think I'm going to switch over to you for physical companionship?" She pokes at his stomach. "Hmm? No way, buster." She realizes then that she has gone too far — it shows in the startled look that comes upon her. This isn't what she wanted to do. Justin seems to be caving in before her eyes. Can she salvage something? "But I — I needed you, Justin, too. Because you're right: he is crazy. And I need someone to rely on, someone sane and intelligent and ... wise."

His hand snaps out across her face, slapping her back off her feet. She sprawls across the doorway. The door opens.

Clancey stands outside, looking first at Kitty, then at Justin. He might bolt at any moment. "Major?" he asks timidly.

Justin seems not to recognize him for a minute. Then he shakes his head. "Not now. Clancey, please. Kitty — I'm sorry, I'm sorry." He rushes to her, to help her up.

"But Major—"

"I'm not a major, Clancey, and I don't know why you have to call me that! Take my hand, Kitty. Kitty?"

"Justin?" She says his name softly

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as she looks around the room. "Where's Francis?"

He looks back at the empty room. "Hestia." He straightens up.

An alarm buzzer screams once; an air lock has opened somewhere.

Justin shoves Clancey out of the way. "I'll get him, Kitty, don't worry." He runs down the hall, knowing that it's too late, wondering why he's putting any effort at all into this when it's what he wanted all along. He thinks of slowing down, but can't.

The departure room is empty when he comes pounding in; the doors are sealed, the air lock closed, and no one is about. He runs to the wall, clears a viewplate, but cannot see anything except arches of color and the blackness of infinity that waits hungrily below. He dashes back into the hallway, to a ladder, climbs up three decks and rushes into the computer-control room. Lurching into a command chair, he flicks on the overhead viewer. The screen blossoms to life with sunburst starbow streaks punctuating the void. Justin presses a button, panning the camera. A moment later, he locates a figure in space. It is no more than a speck, but he hesitates to zoom in for a confirming close-up, tensing at the thought of seeing that face, of looking that specific death in the eyes. He realizes then that death in space has always frightened him somewhere deep down inside, though he has fantasized both Kitty and Vomer in such situations. He looks at the screen again. Something is wrong.

Why isn't Vomer being tossed around out there? Why is he moving in a reasonably straight line? Moving?

Justin fumbles for the controls, zooms the camera, focuses. The camera begins to track automatically. Vomer wears an environ-suit, possibly even the same one Kitty wore. An isostatic field encases him like a giant soap bubble. A line no bigger than a spiderweb thread extends behind him. He holds a propulsion gun in each hand and fires bursts in opposing directions every second, moving against the black-hole tide with incredible deftness. One would think he had a reason.

Justin traces the line back to the ship, but Hestia is nowhere to be seen.

Dropping back in the chair, Justin chews his lip, tangles with blocked rage, hopeful relief, and a ripping desire to scream. Nothing works, nothing ever goes right. Wasn't there a time when a goal was something he went for in a straight line, just plowed through and reached out and caught? Wasn't there? His lower lip pulls out from between his teeth. With grim finality, he shakes his head. No. Never.

Behind him, from the ladder, he hears a sound. He sits up and swings his legs over the edge of the command chair, then looks back.

Kitty stands, still naked, at the end of a row of blank dead consoles. Two red lights from the opposite side of the cabin bathe her in red light. Like a

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child, she has her feet together and her arms wrapped in a tense hug, shoulders hunched together, her face an unnecessary expressive prop above it all — the stance says everything.

Seeing her like that makes Justin tired. He lacks the energy to explain Vomer's survival to her. He sees his life as a smooth plain behind him, the last two years as flat as glass, but with this sudden hilltop where he now stands, he can look to his future. In telling her that Francis is alive he will come down off the hill; his future is yet another flat plain stretching to the horizon. He looks at it sadly, knowing no way of staying on the hill.

He points over his shoulder at the screen, then looks back himself to discover that the screen shows nothing — he was searching for Hestia, and Vomer is out of the picture. He reaches for the knob to retrace the line to Vomer.

Kitty's eyes have stayed on him; she has not looked at the screen and will not. She knows Justin was too late to save Vomer. She knows her lover went out, because the alarm told her as much. She needs no further proof.

Justin glances back at her. Strange, he thinks, that he has no desire for reconciliation with her. Right this moment, if he shuts off the screen, he could probably live out his fantasy with her; he is all she has left — at least that's what she thinks. He checks the screen again, finds Vomer floating down into view. Then he stands. How tired he is suddenly. His body aches like an old man's; he thinks he feels like Clancey.

Without the least change of expression, Kitty uncoils her arms. She has his service revolver in her right hand. Justin's weariness slides away.

"Hey, that's mine. I've been looking for that, where'd you get it?"

"I'm going to kill you, Justin."

"Now ... look here—"

"Then I'm going to kill myself. We can't go back. They won't be anything like us anymore, they probably won't even want us. I'll go crazy here. I'm going to kill us."

"That's stupid, Kitty. You don't want that, listen."

Her arm comes up.

"Kitty, goddamn it, he's not *dead.* He's fine! Look, look at the screen, he's wearing a suit, he's O.K.!"

She risks a glance at the screen. Her mouth opens and closes soundlessly, recalling for Justin Clancey's words: "Fish out of water." It makes a frayed kind of sense, as if the old man reacts premonitorily to occurrences that will happen soon, as if he lives ahead of them but occupies space here. And is he crazy or has Kitty begun to glow?

Justin rubs his eyes. God, he's tired. Kitty has just tried to kill him after Vomer has tried to kill him, and he's daydreaming some argle-bargle about Clancey, who will probably try to kill him soon. How long has he slept? Days, not even hours, but days. How many is impossible to tell since the cor-

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ridor lights never shut off, and here he is back at the flat plain of his constant life. He frowns.

Kitty is still staring at the screen, her mouth still working, and she still seems to be kind of greenishly bright. Justin says, "It's Vomer out there, Kitty. He's fine, he's wonderful" — he turns around — "he's ... holy Christ."

The camera has tracked Vomer's dogged ascent automatically, up and up to the bright object that now fills the screen.

The object is gargantuan, so big that only part of it can be viewed at once. What they see is a globe as bright as a star but contained in a definite shape, and green, vivid green. Three parallel rods, shiny black, run out from it and off the right-hand side of the screen. There seem to be no markings, no windows or external trappings as there are on the *Flavus*. Nothing to identify its point of origin as Earth.

Justin glances at Kitty. His gun still stares him down. He sidles toward her. She takes no notice. He starts to reach for the gun, delicately, casually. A tremor rolls through Kitty. "Annn ... annn ... annn," she says. The gun waves about. Justin hops back to the serenity of the chair.

"It took him!" she cries. "It took him away!"

Justin swings around. The green ball fills the screen. Vomer is missing.

"Major?"

Justin jerks and turns in time to catch his gun as it flies past, Kitty having flung it, startled out of her wits. Clancey stands at rigid attention just behind her. "Major," he says, "one of the women is sick."

The old man must mean Hestia. "Where is she?" asks Justin.

Kitty grabs onto Clancey, shakes him silly. "It took him, it took him, it took him, it took him! Look!" She sobs, her hair spilling over, sticking to her face. "Francisss!" she wails. She runs to the ladder and climbs, crying, out of sight.

"Where's Hestia, Clancey?"

But the old man fails to answer. The green globe has captured his mind.

Justin refuses to look back again. The Gorgon isn't going to get him twice. He needs sanity, calmness, time to gather his wits. He has to be prepared. Sure, it could be an Earthship. Probably is. Plenty of time has gone by out there, hundreds of years. Like Kitty said. Everything would be different. Sure.

"Aliens," whispers Clancey. His voice creaks.

"Don't be silly."

"Aliens!" he shouts. He flings himself through an about-face and runs, actually sprinting to the ladder. Down he drops without the use of the rungs, like an old sea dog. "Aliens!" repeats over and over as Clancey zealously carries the warning to all parts of the ship.

Justin's head bangs. Multiple shadows of him extend across the floor in different colors, spectro-analyzing

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him, breaking him up. The green light behind burns his back. The gun, heavy — it would be so easy, so quick. No. He can't do that. Not yet. He's sick to death of it all, of every single thing in his life, but he can't apply the last bright coat of paint. Watch it spill down onto the plain.

He stands like a statue for a very long time. "I'm hungry," he tells himself at last. The words, like a magic phrase, release him from the green grip. He walks away.

He descends.

II

The two other ships were called *Arcus* and *Lividus;* both were launched after the *Flavus.*

Justin dreams himself onto one of them. He walks down an immense, cavernous corridor where everyone seems to be walking away from him. He taps them on the shoulder; they turn with gargoyle faces to him. "What ship is this?" he asks each face. "Take your position," they tell him, then face away. "I don't have a position — it's not my ship," he tries to explain. No one listens or responds. He wonders suddenly why the names of the three ships are in Latin. Who dreamt up such names? Stupid space program, he says to himself. The mass of grotesque faces all turn and glare at him with round green glowing eyes. They have overheard his thoughts.

He awakens with an after-awareness of a loud noise. Sitting up, he finds that his hand, beneath his pillow, has pulled the trigger on his gun. Brown-black smudges smoke on his pillow. In a panic, he rubs his hands all over his head. No blood. No wound. The bullet has seemingly vanished. Leaning back against the bulkhead, he trembles and wipes around his neck. He wants a shower, wants to feel renewed.

Over the past two years he figures he must have awakened every other morning and wondered how long he could stand it here, how long this insanity would last. Two years — and he still wonders, and he's still here.

How long did he sleep? His watch shows 3:30, but what 3:30? Whose reality does timekeeping belong in?

Justin's stomach churns, making sounds like a water cooler. That meal he ate before going to sleep (what *was* that brown stuff?) does not set well.

He goes into the bathroom and seats himself. The toilet acts as an inverted thinking cap; sitting there, he recalls the recent past with a sober clarity that escaped him while taking part in the events. The first thing he must do is find Hestia. Where can Clancey have sequestered her? He must have dozens of secret niches around the *Flavus* that no one has seen. He can sometimes vanish for days. Therefore, it is actually Clancey he must first find. The old man said Hestia was sick; that means something has broken down

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most likely. He ponders what he could have overlooked in her construction.

The door to his room clicks open.

Justin looks up, startled. He can't see the door from the toilet. He starts to stand, but quickly sits back down. The gun is still on the bed where he left it, in plain sight. Is it Kitty out there? If she sees the gun ... should he call out, hope to distract her, or is it too late, will he only be telling her that he is here like a rabbit in an exotic trap, waiting to die? This is terrific, this is marvelous.

A shadow moves swiftly and silently across the narrow piece of the room he can see. On the back of his neck the hair prickles up. The sheets on the bed rustle. Whoever it is, he has found the gun. Now Justin waits, huddled, not daring to breathe, hoping his killer will think he is gone.

The shadow reappears. It grows across the outer floor, and stretches like a gray amoeba into the bathroom, across the tiles. Justin looks up.

Francis Vomer appears in the doorway. How did he survive? How in hell did he get back in? Justin shivers from tension. He sees that his revolver dangles from Vomer's fingers. This just isn't fair.

Vomer walks forward with lithe grace. A big toothy smile grows on his face. He hands Justin the gun. "You shouldn't leave this around, Morrel. You never know what could happen. I keep mine in my locker."

Justin swallows, nods stiffly. "Yeah. Thanks." He lays the gun across his lap and twitches at his coldness.

Vomer crouches back against the opposite wall. "Boy, it's good to be back. I can't tell you."

"That's O.K. Really."

"No, Justin, it's just that you've no idea what I've been through."

"That's true."

Vomer gets serious. "I'm really sorry about ... well, you know."

"O.K."

"You're all right, Morrel. You didn't have to say that." Vomer becomes animated, begins using his arms to talk, acting out and emphasizing what he says. "I've been so confused. You know, it's tough being responsible for so many people, having all those separate destinies in your hands. And when you're troubled in your mind you lose sight of the shape of things."

Justin debates if he should listen to any more of this or shoot Vomer now.

"But," Vomer grins, "there are miracles. I've gotta tell you. I've been lucky enough to experience one. Yessir. The Potos are my miracle."

"The Potos."

"Oh, come on now. Hey, look, Justin, I'm O.K., see? I'm — I'm — I'm sane now. The Potos saw that I was unbalanced, my mind had gone off kilter, and they fixed me up. God, they're incredible. Brains are like origami to them. Fold and unfold, heh?"

"It was an alien ship," says Justin, his excitement growing. "You met aliens. Vomer! Did they come back with

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you, are they here?"

"No, they left."

"Left?"

"Yeah, well, see, they have a deadline, you know, to meet, and they stopped by because of your beacon — that was such a good idea — but they had to go."

"Stopped by? We're an alien race to them, we've never met before, and they just stop by, look at us, and take off like it's nothing?"

Vomer laughs. "See, I'm no good at explaining or you'd understand. I went into their ship, and they fixed me up and sent me out."

Justin has to look away from that constant smile. It's like lobotomized joy. Vomer *sounds* sane enough and calm enough, but his eyes are wide open, jet black pupils totally surrounded by gleaming whites. As if he has been in a thousand-year coma and now can't get enough of being awake.

"But they're coming back," he says hopefully. "You explained our situation to them."

"Oh sure. They'll be back in a couple of years."

"Years!" He squeezes back a sob.

"Well, we're not exactly on their route, you see. Black holes are kind of like collapsing bridges to them, like places you don't want to travel."

"I don't understand. You mean, they go someplace, black holes?"

"I didn't say that."

He is lying. Justin knows it. His hand closes tighter around the gun butt. "The Potos," he begins, "what did they look like?"

"I never saw them."

"But they fixed you. You said."

Vomer shifts uneasily. "Yeah, but I didn't see...." His mouth pouts for a moment. The air around him seems to thicken, and colors emerge in smoky veils. Justin blinks and moves his head back. The colors are gone. More hairs stiffen on his head. His bowels want to empty.

"Uh, listen, Francis"— he pauses, expecting a reaction, but Vomer only stares wide-eyed back at him — "um, you must be hungry and all, and I know Kitty wants to see you."

"Kitty." His smile stretches into a vile scythe. "Yeah." He stands. "We'll talk more later, Morrel. And I want to see that woman you ... I want to apologize to her."

This is what Justin has been waiting for — for Vomer's back. But as Vomer turns away, Justin sees on the back of his head a square patch where the hair has been removed. A shiny knot of flesh protrudes from it, perfectly smooth, like one end of a marble egg embedded in his head. Justin hesitates. Vomer starts away.

Now! cries the voice in his head. Now, or it will be too late. Justin lifts the gun from his naked lap.

Vomer stops mid-stride and turns. "No, Justin. You can't — you don't know how. It's not as easy as you think it is." He waits. Then, satisfied, he nods and walks out of Justin's

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range of sight. His voice echoes back. "They fixed me. I told them what was wrong."

The door clicks shut.

Justin sights down the gun for a long time after that. His face is ashen. Sweat runs down his wrist, drips from his elbow. Finally, he lowers the gun, setting it on the tiles.

His body shudders.

As it turns out, the toilet is the best place he could be.

"Kitty!" "Clancey!" "Hestia, for god's sake!" "Where the hell are you people?"

The corridor snakes off to the left. Dark noises — mechanical gurgles, grunts, and sighs — resound from distant points. Justin stands as if in an elaborate steel colon, on the verge of being ejected. He can sense imaginatively a traction tugging him back down the hallway toward the air lock, toward the grim black sphincter below.

Where's everybody gone? Have they been pulled down, stood here wondering as he does until some hidden force whipped them off their feet? The ship as enemy. Justin the last survivor, one man against the forces of the infinite. Sounds pretty awe-inspiring, all right, but it isn't the right battle.

He has climbed up and down every ladder to every level of the ship, shouting their names, even crying out "Aliens!" at one point near the cryogenics chamber, but getting no response. He knows, deep down, where he has to go; the options have run out.

So ends the life of Justin Morrel. A man who went aboard a ship, who tried to be a pioneer and a hope for mankind, and who never gave it a second thought.

A fine epitaph. He hopes Clancey won't put him in the food processor.

The ship rumbles like a mountain king.

Justin fingers the gun in the belt of his jumpsuit, then starts down the corridor.

The *Flavus* creaks like an ancient galleon as he climbs the ladder up two decks. He calls out again and gets no answer again. No, there can be no reprieve. What he at first joked about, then promised as a veiled threat, and then attempted by remote control, he must now perform himself. His love for Kitty has nothing to do with it now; in fact, seen in this light, he knows he never loved her at all. What he felt was too perverted to have been true affection. At last he can accept that; and if he can face that, he can face Vomer. Sure. It'll be simple.

He glances behind himself. Someone was there, watching him; he could feel it. But no one is there now.

He continues along the corridor, rounding a corner. Ahead, the lights have been put out for a ten-meter stretch. But Justin keeps going, though his steps are smaller and his sweaty palm is sealed against the gun butt.

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Kitty suddenly emerges from the wall on his left. There is no door, no niche where she could have hidden. She simply appeared. And even in the dim light he can tell that something is horribly wrong with her. Her blue eyes are too large, fingers too long, breasts hanging too low and lopsided. The pale hair on her body moves like cilia around a protozoan, beckoning threads. She grabs for him; simultaneously, he tries to push her back. They meet and pass through one another. Justin stumbles off his feet, lands on his knees in shock, and scrabbles to his feet. He turns around, but Kitty has vanished. Justin finds himself against the wall and begins to slide his way along it. The walls no longer reflect him, and seem to have a secret depth all their own, like seaquarium windows. The floor fades from sight slowly as a thick mist swirls up.

When at last he reaches Vomer's door, Justin has concluded that he is mad and lost in the fantastic. The shining door stands, the wall around it gone, like a door in the middle of nowhere, opening onto another world. A looking glass, a wardrobe. It bears the sign CMMDR. FRANCIS VOMER. The "Francis" is virtually obscured by crayon black shading. Justin recalls when Vomer did that, and clings to the solidity of this memory, as a signpost to his sanity. So encouraged, he draws the gun from his belt and reaches up to open the door.

"Tea party!" yells a deep, deep voice. It sounded like the ship.

Justin presses the doorplate and directs every bit of his concentration onto that nameboard that slides away into nothingness as the door roll back.

A landscape stretches like an open palm before him. Small wrinkled creatures are everywhere, their seamy skin shining like rotted abalone. Some stand in groups, chattering in indecipherable phrases. Others stand alone, wailing. They all stop and observe him as he waits in the doorway, pistol drawn. A few gesture and a few others titter. The joke is on him.

The ground is like desert, with small lumps and dunes, around which more eyes regard him. Where is Vomer in all of this? Suddenly Justin thinks: Behind me! He starts to turn; something shoves him from behind, sending him sprawling into the room, onto his face. It may look like sand, but it feels like steel. His chin cracks hard, but he hangs onto the gun, rolls over ready to fire.

But no one is there. Even the door has vanished.

"Vomer." He climbs to his feet. "Vomer." The ground before him swirls around and around and up into a cylinder that shapes itself into Vomer: incredibly handsome, perfectly trim, and smiling like the devil.

"Hey, Morrel. Glad you made it."

The small creatures sidle over and mirror Vomer's grin.

"Potos," Justin says. Vomer confirms this, but Justin barely hears him;

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some notion just out of reach is forming in his mind. He has to put a few more pieces together to make the notion a picture. "They real? Did they board with you?"

"No and yes," answers Vomer, being cryptic. Or is he? "I told you they fixed me," he continues. "We're a unit now."

Justin shakes his head.

"See — I'm still no good at explaining." Vomer begins using his hands again, scooping the air as he talks. "They speak in images, in impressions. They all live inside one another all the time. And they tried to live inside of me, but I couldn't accept them, and we were an unknown species to them, so they needed to communicate. They just had to talk to me. So they did the one thing they could — they fixed me so we could talk, so they could be in me like they're in each other."

"They're in your mind."

"You betcha. And I'm going to help them out."

"How?"

"I'm to be the first man to enter a black hole."

"You can't do that, that's suicide."

"Naw, naw, I don't mean I'm going to take a walk into it. I mean, we're going to descend into it. We're underway right now, going down at this very moment. And the Potos are in constant contact with me, living inside me. I've got my command back, Justin. I've got a crew again. Isn't this great?"

"Where are the others?"

Vomer's face pinches as if in pain. "We don't need them."

"I didn't ask you that. Where are they?"

"Where are they, what?"

Justin stiffens with anger, but the need to know is stronger. "Where are they, *sir*?"

"Major!"

Justin wheels around. Clancey has appeared behind him where a dune used to be. He is lying on his back, surrounded by strange, dark figures that seem to be transparent. The figures turn their heads toward Justin, and he blanches. They are all corpses's faces, in various degrees of decay. "Major!" Clancey cries. "Help!"

Vomer says, "He never liked me. And he always wanted his old friends back, so now he has them."

"Set him free." Even as he says this, Justin watches Clancey vanish back within the dune.

"Not possible. Soon, though, I'll let him join my crew."

"And Kitty?"

"I'm sorry, Justin. You can't see her." Vomer lowers his head. "She kept me in this room, kept me sedated a lot, and most of the time I had to break out. She was supposed to be my lover, but she didn't love me. So I'm keeping her in here, too, paying her back. She can't see us or hear us; she's in a whole different place and here at the same time. I'm changing her in accordance with her hubris, punishing her by altering her body. I can do that.

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I can do that by entering the mind and making the mind do the altering, like a ... a tailor cutting pants by microwave. That's a good analogy. Isn't it good? Say it's good."

"Vomer, don't. She did — she *does* love you."

"No! She never did. The Potos love me."

"Sure, and so they send you to suicide."

"No. The black hole's a doorway to someplace else. They just don't know where, and I wanted to do it. I want a command."

"And me? What about me?"

Vomer laughs lightly. "You? Nothing. You can't kill me. You didn't keep me locked up. You're the only one who ever did anything nice by me."

"How so?"

"Don't be so modest. Hestia. You gave me someone to command. And I know that once you get over this crazy idea of protecting the others that you and I are going to be real close. You like me — I can tell. Besides, I need you to repair her."

As if on command, Hestia appears behind Vomer. Justin gasps at the sight of her. One half of her face is gone. The black fabric that lay beneath the flesh, the fabric which pulls and stretches to create the impression of muscle, is bared, as is her left eyeball.

"She wouldn't let me out of the ship," Vomer explains. "I had seen the Poto ship, and I wanted to put on my suit. But she wouldn't let me. She wanted me to go out without it. There are some things about her you need to correct, Justin. You didn't get her just right." He smiles benignly. "But, of course, you didn't know the intracacies of my needs. You'll come to."

"Hestia."

"Justin." She walks forward.

"Wait," says Vomer. Hestia continues to walk forward. "Wait," he growls.

Like a man with a severed corpus callosum, Vomer seems to know and yet not recognize that Hestia is mechanical. He can talk about fixing her, even discuss her machine parts, and he still won't know she is anything but another being for him to control. He barks his commands again and again, annoyed at the futility of the act.

Hestia passes around him. He reaches for her.

Justin raises the gun and fires.

Vomer turns back to him slowly, surprised. "Well, I never would have believed it. You're like the others after all. I was giving you a *chance*," he whines. "I was gonna let you help. Now you have to go someplace, too."

Vomer begins to fade.

Justin has just shot at a projection. No wonder Hestia failed to respond to him. She comes to Justin with her arms out to hug him. The ground beneath her starts to swirl. He knows what is going to happen. There isn't much time. "Hestia, here!" He shoves the gun into her hands. "Listen to me."

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The wind around her rises to a howling gale; the sand surrounds her. He screams his command to her, but cannot hear his own voice over the sound of the wind, cannot even tell if he has said anything at all. The wind changes tone, becomes the creaking of the ship as it descends, rending, into the hungry, depthless maw.

The false landscape seems to be changing as he looks on. He knows that he is going away, wherever Vomer has chosen to send him. His mind is right this moment being manipulated and its perceptions altered without his feeling a thing. No nerves to tell him. On his way. It makes him laugh. For whom is he trying to save the ship? Who is left? And for what? Like a big dixie cup, the *Flavus* will crumple as it drops into the gravity well. If it is a gravity well; if it isn't a doorway to hell. When all else fails, why isn't there suicide for him? Why?

The screaming sky explodes with triple thunder.

The landscape, and the wrinkled Potos with it, vanish like a broken daydream.

Clancey lies on the floor at Justin's side, twitching. Justin soon comes to realize that he has been freed, that the visions have fled. He begins to cry, curling up on his side into a ball. He and Clancey are both seated in the second room, the rear room of the commander's quarters. The commander had the privilege of two rooms to himself, whereas everyone else had one. Justin wonders how he drifted so far inside the door. He had thought himself standing in place. And he was sitting.

He climbs to his feet now and walks out the door.

In the outer room Hestia stands firing the empty gun at a corpse with a missing face. She shot him from behind, and the exit wounds have erased his personality.

Hestia lowers the gun as she sees Justin. "Done," she says.

"Yes. Where's Kitty?"

Hestia points at the door. The ship groans.

Justin's eyes go wide. That was no illusion. The ship is really under stress. He sprints across the room, hammers at the door for being too slow, slips through before it has opened totally, and tears down the hallway at full speed, having a momentary sense of déjà vu. He climbs up to the command room. The screen is already on, and the black hole, outlined by a rim of wild sparkling colors, fills the entire screen. He notes quickly that there is no magnification, that the *Flavus* has passed the point of no return. They will go down quite quickly now. No reason to watch it. He pans the camera away and up. He would rather see the stars, experience the fading of reality. At the same time, he opens up the intercom to call to Kitty, to tell her she is all right, that the horror is over, and to invite her up to be with him. But even as he flips the switch, the camera picks

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up an object not far from the lens. He needs little magnification to raise the lump in his throat, to make his heart pound hard. The figure is nightmarish, and not because it has been crystallized by the void.

Vomer's handiwork is still upon her. His tales were not all lies; she is like a figure of wax sculpted by Jekyll as he turned into Hyde. Her shattered eyeballs are worse than anything Justin ever imagined. Where else could she have gone, though? Her end will last for eternity.

He shuts off the camera, and grows aware of an utter calmness within himself. As if in sympathy, the ship, too, has stopped its groaning.

"Major?" Clancey's head pokes up above the exit hole. "Ah, there you are. Everything all right here?"

Justin tries to answer, but has to nod.

"Good. I'll send that young woman up here to see you. I hope you can do something for her."

He nods again. Can he get through? he wonders. "Clancey? We're going down into a black hole, Clancey."

The old man stares at him for a long moment. Is he dealing with the probability of death, does he comprehend the meaning? Somehow, it seems to Justin that he understands perfectly.

At last Clancey nods. "Well, I'd better go pack." His head vanishes into the hole.

Justin leans back in the command chair and looks up at the blank screen. He reaches up and turns on the camera once again, quickly readjusting it to peer into the black hole that looms closer every second. Then he shuts down the room lights and adjusts himself comfortably in the chair.

Odd that there should be no noise. Perhaps the Potos were right after all. Perhaps the hole does go somewhere.

A great tranquility settles over him, mingled in the red glow of the console lights before him. Such peace has never found him before.

He thinks: We'll go in together, Kitty.

They fall.

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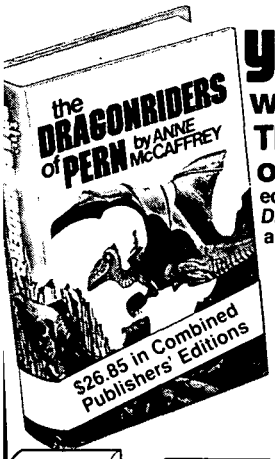

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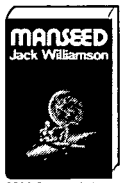

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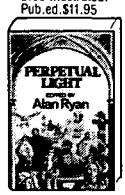

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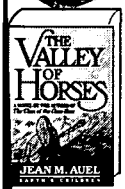

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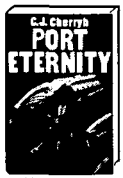

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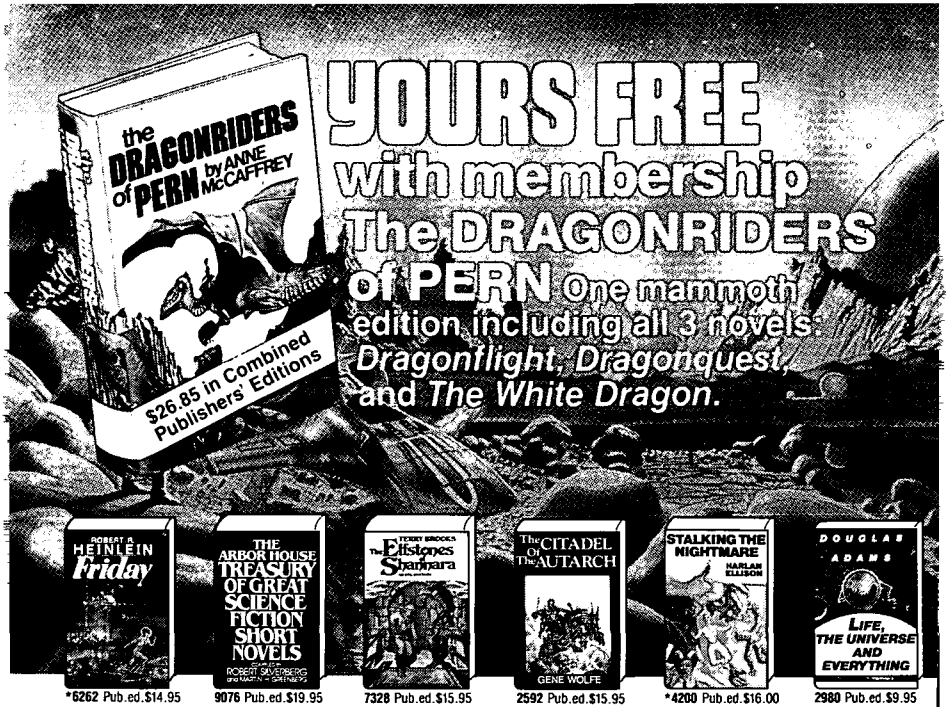
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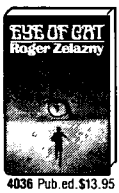

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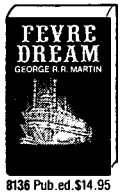

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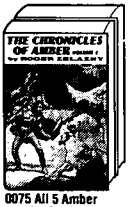

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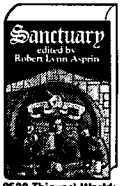

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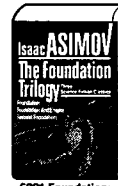

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